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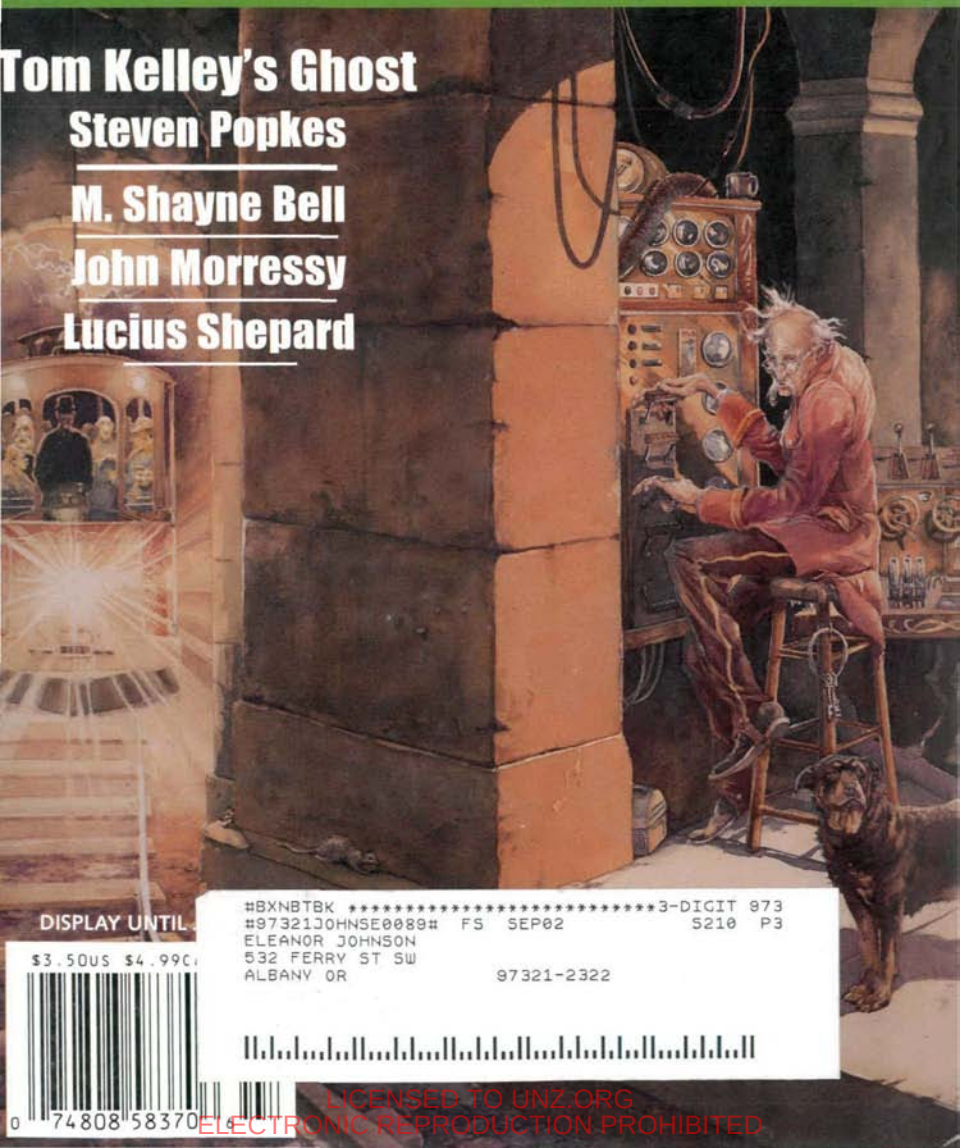

Tom Kelley's Ghost

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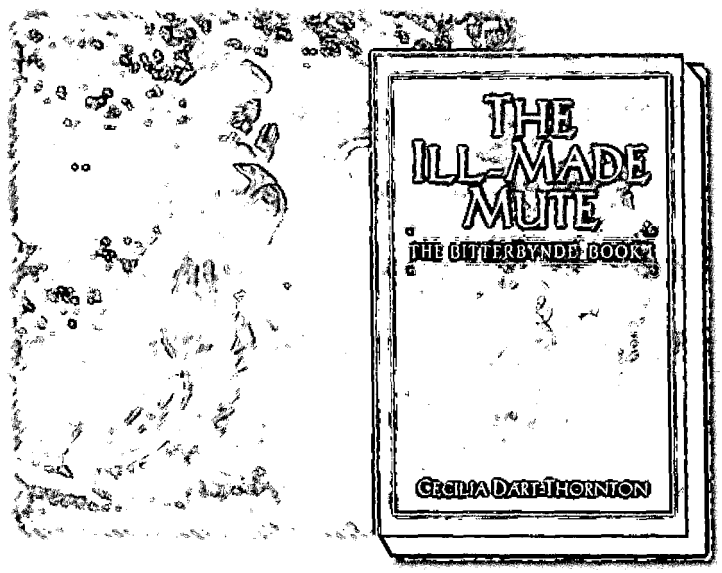

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Steve Popkes is probably best known as a science fiction writer. His novel Caliban Landing *was sf told from an alien's point of view. His short fiction has appeared primarily in* Asimov's SF *magazine and he was one of the key writers in the Future Boston project that came out a few years ago. However, his first story for us is pure fantasy, a ghost story that rings true through and through.*

Tom Kelley's Ghost

By Steven Popkes

TOM KELLEY HIMSELF BUILT the house to be a brothel in 1901. The Burtts bought the house in the thirties. They sold it to the Smiths in the 1980s. We purchased it from the Smiths.

My wife and I loved it. Nothing fazed us. Nothing even brought down our spirits. When the basement turned out to be not merely damp, but to have a spring-fed stream flowing under the oil tank, we watched the sump pump with a strange fondness as it ran feverishly at all hours of the night. When I found frogs coming up out of the ancient French drain, it was amusing. I felt a benign presence in the house, a friendly spirit.

Once we owned the house, we decided it was time to start a family. We thought it would be easy. After all, humans have been doing it for millions of years. How difficult could it be? Instead, we ended up in the Country of the Fertility Doctors.

First, there was the year or so to come to the notion there was a problem. After that, there was the first round of surgeries, then the drugs, then the second round of surgeries, then more drugs, then stronger drugs,

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then real, no-kidding-around, possibly serious side-effects, multiple injections exactly at 9:00 P.M., with different kinds for different parts of the cycle, drugs. There were the attempts. First, the natural, then with different "helping" methods, until finally we were up at dawn and I was holding her hand in the operating theater as they removed her ova. Then, back to the Magazine Room for my donation. Two days later, *back* to the OR to put the resulting cluster of cells back in. Please wait two weeks and we'll tell you it didn't work.

This was the closest thing to war I'd ever experienced. Like war, it left us hollow-eyed and empty, bereft of spirit. The history of the house became a cruel irony. Compulsively, I read about Tom Kelley and the house he made. I became obsessed with the history of the house, its women and its men.

It was during this time that I began to find little bits of debris around the porch and under the old hemlock out front. A cigarette butt. Neither of us smoked. A piece of worn stone. A bit of ceramic from an old electrical terminal. Flotsam and jetsam surfacing from the past, I thought initially. Every old house is a midden and the trash eventually works its way out of the soil into the light of day. Still, the butts looked fresh to me and the worn stone looked as if it had been placed on the porch as a sort of offering. Kids, I figured, unwilling to think it might be anything else.

Finally, as unmistakable and unbelievable as morning, one of the procedures worked. My wife told me when I got home. Being so informed is not unlike being in a slow-motion train wreck. That night, long after she had gone to bed, I stared out the window, watching the stars wheel overhead, wondering what had happened to me. It was early winter, long past the time for fireflies, but I saw a light floating near the porch. It moved like the lit end of a cigarette in the hands of a man. I stared closely but saw no one but the small light. I remembered the feeling I'd had of a benign presence when we first moved in. I looked away and back again and there was a man sitting on the porch. I put on a coat and went out and sat beside him.

The light of the cigarette was his. He turned to look at me. I will never forget his face, gaunt and shadowed as if dirty, stubbled and pale like black weeds growing through snow, dark eyes beneath an old slouch hat. He was dressed in an old jacket and pants, and he crouched as he sat, which made

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him look small. For all of that, there was a sense of size about him, and the feel of lost power like a sick and aging criminal or a vagabond king.

The air was clear and bitterly cold and the thin snow on the ground was lit by a half moon. I could hear the undersides of the snow crack into ice and freeze to the ground. I could hear my breathing and the clicks and knockings as the trees contracted with the night. The snow itself had a soft sandy sound as it settled, cooling after being warmed by the day. All the world was making an acoustic transition from day to late night, including me. My companion had no sound to him. He smelled of smoke and I could see his face by the moonlight, but there was no other sense of him. Perhaps, that's what makes a ghost: someone who cannot be held within all the senses but only one or two.

He stared at me, waiting, and I told him his story.

TOM KELLEY WAS not born in Hopkinton. No one, in fact, ever truly knew where he hailed from. He showed up in Hopkinton in spring of 1899, young but of indeterminate age. No one knew why. He came in late at night and slept in the commons until dawn. Then, he banged on Mrs. Bowker's rooming house until she let him in. There he stayed. He didn't speak of his past. His very mystery excited people. He had little talent, it seemed, save his charm — which was considerable. Tom Kelley could charm the legs off a mule, so they said. Other descriptions, usually involving local young women, were less than savory. Still, no harm ever came to him.

Kelley stayed at the rooming house for two years, talking around town and going for long walks up north toward Southborough. Folks in Hopkinton thought Southborough one notch up on the cultural scale and therefore disliked the town. This didn't bother Southborough much since the population of that town shared the same opinion. Southborough stood as the beginning of the larger industrial mill towns north of Hopkinton: Southborough, Marlborough, Hudson. South of Hopkinton was farm country though there were small mills everywhere. The land between Hopkinton and Southborough stretched ten miles wide and about thirty miles long, starting from the east end of Framingham and reaching west nearly to Worcester. It was composed of rickety farms and unknown

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woods. Tough characters lived there. Bodies had been found and folks had disappeared without explanation in that little thirty-mile stretch of forest. Dirt roads linked little village to little village and the railroad cut through the heart of it. When Tom Kelley went walking north, some were afraid for him, some were hoping he wouldn't return, and some were unsurprised.

In spring of 1901, he moved out of the rooming house and began to build a house. By fall of 1902 he finished it. It was on the road to Cordaville, a wide spot in the dirt lane with little to recommend it, and was on the top of a hill that had once been used for pasture. Down the hill from the house ran the train tracks. The following winter, he opened for business. The Boston outbound trains made an unscheduled stop at the foot of his hill where Tom's wagon waited for them. Kelley's clients rode the wagon up the hill and, usually, spent the night. The next morning the same wagon took those clients back down the hill and the inbound train returned them to Boston.

Some folks in Hopkinton didn't like having a brothel in town and talked about closing him down. One brave soul suggested the house be burnt to the ground and went so far as to take a gang on a raid. Kelley was waiting for him with two cold-eyed, professionally armed men who clearly had no compunction about shooting a bunch of frustrated farmers. The raid broke up of its own accord. The following year there was talk about closing him down again, about taking the matter to the statehouse. This remained talk and the year after that there was no talk at all. The Tom Kelley House had become part of the landscape. Though when it was discussed, as it was on more than one occasion, it was said that Kelley must have made a deal with the devil to get that railway stop.

So the situation remained through the Great War, into Prohibition and deep into the heart of the Roaring Twenties.

The night he celebrated his forty-fifth birthday was on a Sunday, since Sunday was the only day the house was closed. This was more because of lack of business rather than any spiritual leanings Tom might have had. That night he boasted to a friend as they were drinking that he had never been in love. Tom maintained at length that sex was like some charge of electricity. (He'd recently installed a generator and electric lighting in the house and was enamored of all things electrical.) The charge built up and

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had to be bled off properly and regularly or men might explode like broken transformers into thievery, violence, and murder.

"I'm performing a public service," he said stoutly. "I'm keeping *down* all manner of crime just by making my girls available at reasonable rates."

The friend, a younger man by the name of Gerald Monahan, agreed that Tom's house was public and a service and said no more than that, since as a friend he received a significant discount on the food and drink and to say otherwise might jeopardize Tom's good graces.

The following day Tom sat on the verandah, nursing an aching hangover and trying to remember all that had occurred the night before. This had become something of a recent preoccupation when he drank; as his capacity lessened, in this and in other appetites, he had grown concerned he was getting old. The thought was a novel one to him and he had been considering it, thinking over the accumulated aches and pains as an accountant tallies figures.

A young woman walked the dirt track that split off from Cordaville Road to his house and past it down to the railroad. He heard her long before he saw her for she had sewn bells into her valise, a common practice in the area to prevent thievery and to keep off the devil.

Tom was, as always, the first up since he could not sleep past dawn. So he watched her from the shadowy silence of his house and the long still summer morning. There was still dew on the grass and the night before had been unseasonably cool, though the day promised to be hot. The result was that Tom's body was pleasantly confused between warmth and coolness. He found himself wanting a cup of coffee. This gave him hope he might live a little while longer.

She must be a cousin to somebody down across the tracks, he thought, scratching the hair on his belly. Or maybe she means to walk all the way to Westborough looking for a job. The girl was not very pretty. Her lips were thick and her teeth too prominent. But her skin was fair and freckled and her cheeks were round and gave an Old World charm to her face. Tom glanced at her body and visualized her without clothes. Lean, he conjectured, with some light padding in the thighs and thin pubic hair. Small breasts, close together, with small, pale nipples. Tom had been in business for a long time and sized up women the way a farmer examined livestock or a foreman observed the size and strength of his men.

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The girl turned into his walk and came up to him on the verandah.

"Mister Kelley?" she said.

"Yes." He leaned back in his chair.

"I've come to work for you. My name's Maggie Bowker."

He stared down at her. He'd never hired locally, preferring to acquire girls from the cities where the practice had a more established history.

"I see," he said slowly. "You're from Hopkinton?"

She nodded.

"Any relation to Elisabeth Bowker? She used to run the rooming house there."

"I'm her daughter."

"Why do you want to work for me?"

She looked at him steadily. "That's where the money is, isn't it? And aren't you fairer about it than most?"

Tom nodded reluctantly. "Come on in. We'll have a cup of coffee."

So, Maggie came to stay.

AT FIRST, she was treated the same as the other girls.

A few weeks after she'd come to the house, Tom rose at dawn to music. Like most such houses, there was a piano in the front room. On Saturday nights, a piano player came in and spun out tunes for the waiting gentlemen, encouraging drinking, singing, and other kinds of foreplay. This morning, he heard a darker, more delicate and somber melody. One he recognized.

"That's Moonlight Sonata," he said when Maggie was finished.

"I know."

"I like that piece of music."

"I know that, too."

He looked at her for a long time. "Your mother told you that?"

She nodded. "And other things. I've come to sleep with you, Tom Kelley. To touch you with my mouth and fingers and make gentle love to you until you have no other alternative but to love me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Then what?"

"Then your course should be obvious."

"I don't sleep with my employees. It's a rule."

"That's a lie," she said hotly. "Half the women here have been your lovers."

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"It's a rule now," he said quietly. "Keep playing. You sound nice." So, he put her on weekends like some of his special girls.

Maggie did well at the house. Over time, she had her regulars and her friends. Tom protected his employees as best he could and none of the girls were battered or beaten by their clients. Prostitution is rarely what one might call good work, but Tom made it as easy as possible. Over that year, Tom did not sleep with her, nor with any of the other girls. This was unusual. Tom was a man of appetites and he was used to getting them satisfied on a regular basis. I don't think either of them could have given a reason. It came down to a competition between them who would succumb first. Maggie had youth and strength. Tom had deceit and guile. No one had much illusion who would win.

A year to the day from when she first arrived, she came to his office wearing her most subtly erotic dress. It was morning and she brought him some coffee.

"So, old man," she said affectionately. "It's been a hard year for you, not sleeping with *anybody*. Don't you think you've toughed it out enough?" She leaned over to give him a long look down the front of her dress. He stared for an unguarded moment.

Truth to say, Tom was tempted. It had been a year surrounded by soft flesh and the smell of sin. Chastity was not one of his virtues. For the first time, he was glad he was past his youth. Had he been twenty, or even thirty, he would never have made it.

"I'm going for a walk," he said suddenly and stood up. "I'll be back later. Tell the others."

He walked down Cordaville Road, crossed the river, and walked upstream past the old millpond. Then he stepped into the forest.

The borderlands that stretched between Worcester and Boston were not like the dense, mythical forests of Europe or even the freshly discovered forests of the New World. Both of those forests were long gone. These borderlands were an accident of industry and human migration. They were not completely forested nor were they particularly old. Every hillside had been clear-cut at one time or another since the Pilgrims. Since the 1870s, it had become a patchwork of abandoned farms, meadows, and forests. The oaks remained and upstart maples were growing now where

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chestnuts had been destroyed by the blight. The elms, often more than a hundred feet tall and shaped like joyous, photographically arrested fountains, still towered over the roadways, occasional broad open meadows, and forest. Thus, the wood Tom turned into was dark and overgrown with moss, and dangerous, but gave only the illusion of age. Tom had watched much of the reclamation in the twenty years he had been running his house.

He followed a faint path as much by feel as by sight. After a time, he could smell wood smoke and the sour smell of homemade whiskey. The trail widened and poured into a clearing beneath an immense elm. The trunk of the elm was six feet thick. Its symmetrical shape was marred by limbs that had broken off from storms in years past to give the appearance of a montage of younger trees grafted onto an ancient root.

Beneath the tree was a small, ramshackle house, made of unplaned planks sawn raw from newly felled trees. Over time they had split against each other and the cracks had been filled with mud or cement. The roof was similarly built. The house gave the impression of a wasp's nest made intimate with broken trees. An old dog was sleeping in front of the door. Tom squatted and patted his head. "Good boy. How are you doing, Fowler?" he said softly.

Fowler grinned and went back to sleep.

"Jake?" Tom stood up and called. "You around here?"

"Up here."

Tom looked up and saw a small old man about forty feet up sitting on a thick limb. He held a jug in his hands.

"What are you doing up there?"

Jake shrugged. "Don't rightly know. Got drunk last night and found myself here. Seemed like the place to be at the time."

"Why don't you come down?"

"There you go again." Jake spit casually to one side and Tom moved out of the way. "Always trying to make things go the way you think they ought to go. Why don't *you* come up *here*?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Then talk."

"Down here."

"Nope."

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Tom looked around exasperated. "I'm forty-five. I'm too old to climb trees."

"I'm near seventy. I'm too old to argue with you."

"Damn," he said with feeling. He judged he'd start with the lowest limb but slipped and fell back.

"Start on the next one," advised Jake. "It's easier."

Tom did so and in a few minutes, breathing heavily, he was sitting on a limb adjacent to Jake. Wordlessly, Jake handed him the jug. Tom took a swig, choked and wiped his eyes, then handed it back.

"Jesus," he muttered, wiping his eyes. A quarter stick of dynamite went off in his head and everything took on a startling clarity. "Good batch."

Jake sipped at the jug. "Yeah. I let this one age a week or so." He held the jug against his belly. "This is for export if you want it. I boiled off the wood alcohol and everything." He pursed his lips. "Pity. I kind of like that methanol taste."

"It'll kill you."

"I ain't dead yet. Besides, it's in the cards that you'll be dead before me. I'll have to bury you."

Tom looked at him sharply. "How do you figure?"

Jake sipped at the jug and didn't answer.

"So," said Jake after a few minutes. "What do you need?"

"Nothing. I needed a break."

"Horseshit. You never come all the way out here just to pass wind. This about the new girl?"

"How'd you know about her?"

Jake snorted. "She's been there a year. News doesn't travel that fast out here in the woods, but it does travel. I heard. Heard she's popular, too. Popular enough for the likes of you."

"I haven't been with her."

"Nor with anyone else, I hear." He cackled. "You must be so damned horny the crack of dawn ain't safe around you."

Tom stared down at the ground. "I've been better," he confessed.

"So sleep with somebody."

"It's not that simple."

"You sleep with somebody else then you have to explain why you

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won't sleep with Maggie. She's Beth Bowker's daughter, eh? She your daughter too?"

"No."

"Why not? She could be. Ain't no secret about you and Beth."

"It's a secret from her husband."

"Maybe not even him."

Tom shrugged and shook his head. "She's not my daughter."

Jake looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Then, why not?"

"It's my business."

"Sleep with Betty, then. Or Veronique. And tell Maggie that."

Tom shook his head again.

"Then why the hell did you come out here?"

"You're always good to talk to. Besides, I have to keep in contact with my suppliers."

Jake chuckled again. The day had become warm so he leaned forward and took off his shirt. The hair of his chest was as gray as his head. He scratched it, pulled out one and looked at it. "I haven't made a batch for you in years. Besides, Prohibition's going to be repealed. In about ten years."

"That's ten years of profit, old man."

Jake looked at him speculatively. "You might make it that far. You're forty-six, right?"

"Forty-five."

"You might make fifty-five. Not much more."

"What the hell are you on about today? Why are you so goddamned morbid? If you're so goddamned smart, what the hell am I going to goddamned die of?"

Jake grinned. "You shouldn't swear. It doesn't come naturally to you. You repeat yourself."

"Fuck you."

Jake leaned toward him. "You're going to die because of her."

Tom started as if stung. "Who? Maggie?"

Jake nodded. "With her you have drunk your death."

"What does *that* mean?"

Jake leaned back against the tree and didn't answer.

"What?" Tom persisted. "Do you mean I might lose the house? That

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the upstanding citizens of Hopkinton might finally run me out of town?" He thought for a minute. "I can deal with that. Or do you mean she's going to kill me or that maybe I'll die because of something she did?" No answer. "Okay," he said softly. "I can deal with that."

"Do tell."

"Or do you mean something worse?" Tom threw up his hands. "That I might burn in *hellfire*. Because of her." He spat contemptuously. "I can deal with that, too."

"Good for you. You're the one who made the deal with the devil."

"I didn't," Tom said, suddenly uneasy. "I made a deal with Honey Fitz — and then Michael Curley. Do you think I'd sell my soul for a lousy railroad connection?"

Jake shrugged. "It's a different world these days. You don't sell all of your soul to the devil. Just controlling interest."

"You're a fine one to talk. Who's making hooch?"

"For medicinal purposes only."

"Yeah. Right. Besides, there is no devil. There is no God. Nothing up there but the sun and the dark."

Jake nodded. "You're right, of course. So why are you here?"

Tom poked him on the shoulder. "To have this conversation, I suppose. But, I think you're right."

"About what?"

"It's not Maggie's business why I won't sleep with her. I'll sleep with Betty. Or Veronique. To hell with Maggie." He slipped off the tree. "Thanks. You always set me straight."

"You're welcome," Jake called after him. "Next time remind me what we're talking about."

Tom came back to the house a changed man. He went upstairs with Veronique (whose real name was Ethel) and spent a good afternoon with her. Maggie didn't take it well, though she didn't say anything. She just looked sad.

Each of the girls had their regulars, as I said. Tom charged each girl a flat fee for an encounter and collected the money from the women. The girls kept their own tips and anything they made over Tom's fee. Several of the girls made good money with this arrangement and after a few years

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moved to Chicago, or further West, where no one knew them and they could set themselves up without scrutiny. But some girls had favorites they didn't like charging and paid Tom's fee for them. This was sex for love, rather than money, and it cost them.

Maggie fell for a charming but worthless young man by the name of Derek Kenny. He was as charming as Tom had been in his youth but without Tom's sense. He went through Maggie's money in about four months and then disappeared. Maggie was heartbroken. She was morose and brooding for about six weeks, then one day she disappeared.

Tom asked the girls, of course. They didn't have any idea where she had gone. They knew why, though. Maggie was pregnant. She'd gone off to find Derek.

Tom went into town and asked Elisabeth Bowker, Maggie's mother. Elisabeth saw him briefly. No one ever overheard what was said between them but it wasn't profitable. Tom returned to the house knowing no more than before.

After a few days wrestling with himself, he walked back into the woods to the old elm tree.

"You don't want to find her," called out Jake when he came into sight.

Tom held his tongue and saved his breath for the last climb of the hill. "Why not?"

"I told you last time: She's your death."

"I told *you* last time: I'll take that chance. Where is she?"

Jake was sitting on a stump in front of his shack. He looked up at Tom speculatively. "What the hell do you want with her?"

"That's my business."

"Did you sleep with her?"

"No."

Jake shook his head. "She your daughter?"

"No." Tom sighed. "I told you that last time."

"Don't *fuck* with me!" Jake shook his finger at Tom. "I know where you come from. I know where you been. I know why you're in that house. I know where the bodies are buried. If Maggie Bowker ain't your daughter, she could have been. Is she?"

"No."

"Then why?"

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Tom ignored him and stared.

Jake fidgeted. "Why ask me?" he whined. "I'm just an old man. I'm out here just listening to the owls and the wind."

"I know better than that."

Jake laughed and stood up. "True. I don't know where she is. But she went from your place into town."

"How do you know?"

"I heard it from the wind and the owl," Jake said irritably.

"Where in Boston?"

"How the hell should I know? Ask your friend." Jake grinned. "Ask the devil."

TOM TOOK the train in. In the years since he'd moved to Hopkinton, he'd taken that train to Boston more than a hundred times. He remembered when the trolley line downtown had been buried, tunneling down beneath the city as if crawling through catacombs. He remembered coming into Boston feeling ancient among all of the young soldiers on their way to France though he was only a few years older. He remembered coming into town to pay his respects to Honey Fitzpatrick when Fitzpatrick announced he was quitting the mayor's office and running for Congress and threw a party for all of the Irish in town. Later that same year, Tom had come back into town for another party, this time for the new mayor, Michael Curley. Tom's house depended on the largesse and protection of such men, of similar men in Framingham and Worcester, of the state railroad commissioners and others. Tom knew them all.

Still, it's not good for business for the owner of a good-sized whorehouse and speakeasy from outside of town to call directly on the mayor of Boston. Instead, Tom started with a ward boss he knew who was named Monahan. The ward boss didn't know either Derek Kenny or Maggie Bowker but sent him to a police sergeant named Smitty in Jamaica Plains. Smitty didn't know either *personally* but suggested he speak with the police captain at the station in Scollay Square. Captain Tripp had met Derek once, a while back, and had heard he'd been throwing money around in the North End and sent Tom to meet with a Sicilian named, of all things, Bobby.

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Bobby was short and nervous. He met Tom in a basement restaurant in the North End. Tom bought him some lunch.

Bobby wouldn't speak with him for several minutes and instead toyed with the food. Finally, he sat back and said: "I'll tell you the truth, Mister Kelley. Just because Captain Tripp sent you to me. He and I have an understanding. Yeah, I know Derek Kenny. I know Maggie Bowker. I'm not going to tell you where they are. Derek's always been smooth as Chinese silk with the girls. But he's got a mean streak. He's nasty when you cross him."

"Maggie's pregnant by him," said Tom quietly, knowing the truth of that was far from certain. "I'm trying to look out for her."

Bobby shook his head. "Let her look out for herself. That's the safest thing. You go poking into Derek's business and you'll find yourself owning some new holes."

"Where can I find him?"

"Don't ask me. Ask somebody better protected." Bobby laughed. "You could ask Curley. I bet he'd know."

James Michael Curley's presence was protected by his secretary, a slight young man studying a series of legal documents when Tom entered the office. Tom gave him a note for Curley and a five-dollar bill to ensure its delivery and then went to Lonigan's, an Irish tavern down the street in Scollay Square. Tom had a root beer and some fish and chips. The place looked sad. Before Prohibition, Tom's house had made about the same money on the girls and the drinks. Now, alcohol supported the house. Often, a man coming in from off the street had to choose between a girl and a drink. A good portion of the time the drink won. As profitable as things were for Tom, he still longed for the day he could buy a beer in the open. A pint to go with his fish and chips seemed a distant dream. Root beer just didn't make the grade. Two hours passed until Curley came into the tavern.

"Can I buy you a pint, Mister Mayor?" Tom asked politely, holding up the remains of his root beer.

"Thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness in allowing me to meet you discreetly." Curley sat back in his chair. Tom admired him frankly, from his spotless suit to his jeweled stickpin.

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"I'm honored you'd see me at all, sir."

"Nonsense. We've known each other a long time. You helped me when Honey Fitz was in office."

"Yours was the greater help," said Tom. "I have a small hope you could help me again."

"What's the problem?"

"One of my girls has run off and I'm trying to find her."

Curley frowned. "It's better to let them go, Tom. Bringing back an unwilling girl to your house is tantamount to white slavery. Besides, it's bad for business. Does she owe you money?"

Tom shook his head. "No. I'm looking for her because I think she might be in trouble — actually, she is in trouble. She's pregnant by one of her clients."

Curley looked puzzled. "She ran off with him? That seems a problem solved to me."

"She didn't run off with him. She ran off to find him. Derek Kenny. I've tried to find him myself. Eventually I was sent to you."

Curley's face clouded and he didn't speak for a moment. "This is a problem to be forgotten, not solved. My advice is to forget it. Forget the girl. Forget the baby. If she's taken up with Kenny, there's not much hope for her."

"My impression of Kenny was not particularly malignant," said Tom mildly.

"Then why are you looking for him?" Curley snorted. "You must have sensed something about the man to think the girl might be in danger. Who is this girl, anyway?"

"Margaret Bowker."

"Elisabeth Bowker's daughter?"

"Your memory always astonishes me, sir."

Curley didn't reply. Instead, he carefully pulled a cigar from his pocket and began the ritual of preparing it to be smoked. "Is she your daughter?"

"You're the second person to ask that. You know that cannot be true."

"So I'd thought. But how else to explain your behavior? I know you too well to think you would pursue foolishness for love." Curley struck a match and held it for some seconds to let the sulfur burn off, then lit the cigar. Sweet rolls of smoke wreathed his head as he puffed.

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Tom shrugged. "What can you tell me about Kenny?"

Curley leaned back. "Derek Kenny is Frank Kenny's son. Frank helped me in my first election and I made him a car man in the transit system. He was a good man. I tried to do the same for Derek but he got into too many fights. Finally, there was a theft from one of the cashboxes. Derek protested his innocence and, truth to be told, we didn't want any scandal in these days. We let him go without prosecution. Derek's been involved in petty crimes and with petty criminals ever since."

"I talked to Bobby Cannaro yesterday," said Tom slowly. "He seemed actually scared of Derek. Bobby's not the type to be scared of a cutpurse or a thief."

"Yes. That's true." Curley adjusted himself in his seat. "There's more. Most of the time, Derek's just a charming rogue, a small-spirited man involved in small-spirited things. But sometimes, he's.... Well, he's not the same person. He becomes uncivilized. Barbaric." Curley pulled at his cigar thoughtfully. "He becomes a man one would rather not deal with. A dangerous man. I'm not surprised he found his way to Cannaro. I am surprised Cannaro is afraid of him."

"More than a bit," Tom said dryly.

Curley pursed his lips. "I think of Derek as the deeply disturbed son of a friend. Perhaps I was derelict in my duty in discharging him. Perhaps I should have had him sent to an institution. The workings of the city are my responsibility and by extension the welfare of those who are its employees is my responsibility as well. He seems to me to be a man ruled by both Sun and Moon."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

He looked at Tom apologetically. "I was speaking of him in larger symbolic terms. By the Moon's light, Derek is a pleasant, shiftless soul. Sometimes overly aggressive. Sometimes lazy. But always a light too dim. Under the light of the Sun, he becomes strong and pitiless. Arrogant and powerful." He pulled at his cigar. "As I said, I speak only in symbolic terms. I could have just as easily said he was ruled by Venus and Mars or under the sway of both angels and devils."

"An odd perception."

Curley waved his hand. "There are few frontiers left, Tom. Africa has come under control of Europe. Both poles have been discovered and

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reached. Man flies wherever he will. The only frontier left is that of the human mind." He tapped the side of his head. "The German psychologists have shown us that."

"Where can I find him?"

"Ah, forgive me. That is why you came to see me, isn't it? He sometimes loiters in the Carman's union hall. If your friend Maggie comes to see him she might find him there. There is also a tavern remarkably like this one on B Street in South Boston eponymously named the B Street Tavern. Although, as opposed to this unfortunate establishment, in that locale if you ask discreetly and preferably in a brogue you might get a pint of stout for your troubles. It is near the repair terminal. He has been seen there. Odd how all Irish taverns look alike, isn't it?" Curley carefully put out his cigar and replaced it in his pocket. "Did you hear how back in the home country the wealthy Irish families imported English cooks to give their food more variety?"

"It's a filthy lie. There are no wealthy Irish families."

Curley chuckled. "As you say. Good day, Tom. I wish you well." With that, he left.

THERE WAS NO ONE at the Carman's union hall. Tom took the trolley down to B Street. As he started down the stairs into the B Street Tavern he collided with a well-dressed young man exiting. Tom staggered back against the building and the young man sat down heavily at the bottom of the stairs. Tom straightened up and reached down to help the young man to his feet.

"Just a minute," he said as he recognized the young man. "You're Curley's secretary. I left a note with you this morning."

"Yes, sir. Daniel Itchwater."

"What are you doing here?"

The young man stammered and did not answer immediately.

"Were you trying to warn Kenny I was coming?" Tom shouted at him.

Dan got hold of himself. "No, sir. I didn't know you were coming here at all."

"Why, then?"

Silently, Dan pulled a scrap of newsprint from his jacket and gave it

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to Tom. It was a clipping about a robbery happening early that morning. Three men. Two of them had been killed but the third had gotten away with "thousands of dollars." It was typical of the *Globe* to be imprecise, thought Tom. The descriptions of the men were vague as well. Tom looked down at Dan with strong suspicion. "Derek?"

Dan nodded. "I think so. He's my friend. I've come to see him."

"Is he in there?"

Dan nodded again. "I saw him. He wouldn't tell me anything."

Tom pocketed the clipping. "I'll keep this. Go on back to Curley's office. Pretend you don't know him."

Dan ran up the stairs and disappeared down the street.

Tom entered the tavern.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. He wasn't sure he would know Derek by sight in this dim light. It turned out not to matter. Sitting next to him at a table in the back was Maggie.

Maggie saw him instantly and tensed like a cat. Derek was more interested in his drink. Tom was morally certain it was not root beer.

He crossed the room and pulled out a chair opposite them. "Can I join you?" He sat down without waiting for a reply.

Derek looked up at him sullenly. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, the space around them dark and hollow. His finely shaped nose had been broken and healed since Tom had seen him last. It now listed prominently to the left and had a pronounced swelling across the bridge. His cheekbones protruded and his cheeks had become hollow, giving him an underlit actor's look. Derek was still dressed well but now the clothes hung loosely on him as if he'd thinned down under a terrible weight.

"Afternoon, Tom," said Maggie in a low voice. Maggie, on the other hand, seemed to have properly filled out since she had left the house. Her face had gained the color that Derek's lacked. Even though she barely showed, she wore the flushed excitement of pregnancy. Tom guessed that she'd gotten over her morning sickness.

"Maggie," he said in a similar voice. "You look well."

"I feel fine." She sounded puzzled that this was so.

"Derek, you don't look so good." Tom nodded toward the younger man.

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"Tom Kelley," said Derek. Tom could tell from the sound of his voice that beer had been the weakest of his drinks for some time. "I didn't know you came into Boston."

"I spoke to your friend Dan when I came in."

Derek shook his head. "I don't know anyone named Dan."

Tom ignored him. "He gave me this." Tom put the clipping on the table.

Derek didn't look at it. His gaze had fallen back to his drink. Tom felt a sudden contempt for this sodden drunk. No wonder he'd bungled the robbery. How had Derek managed it at all? Maybe he hadn't. The description of the third man was vague and inconclusive. It might have been Derek; then again, it might not. Maybe Tom had let himself be swayed by Dan's belief that it had been Derek.

Maggie glanced at the clipping. Her face changed from wariness to outrage. Tom prepared himself. No doubt she was going to turn on him for suspecting her man.

Instead, she turned on Derek: "You told me it was off! You promised! You said you were through with the lot of them."

Derek looked at the clipping for the first time. "I am, aren't I? They're dead, aren't they?"

"Now that you're a wanted man." She pulled his face to hers. "I said I didn't want my baby's father to be in jail."

Derek shook her off. "If it is my baby."

"It is."

"How do I know that? How many customers did you have in four months?" Derek turned to Tom. "How many?"

"Don't drag me into this," said Tom mildly.

"Hell," said Derek morosely. "It could be his kid."

"Not much chance of that, is there Tom?" Maggie threw back her hair and glared at Tom.

"None," Tom agreed, wondering what she knew.

"So what?" said Derek. "It could be anybody's."

"No, it couldn't." She leaned down to him. "I never did it with anybody for love but you. It's your baby. I *know*."

Derek gave Tom a look as if to say: You see what I have to put up with. "Well, I did it for you. And him." He nodded toward Maggie's belly. "You'll both be taken care of."

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She slapped the top of his head. "And you'll be in jail. Or dead." She stood up and faced Tom. "If I came back, would I have to give up the baby?"

Tom shook his head. "Of course not."

"A crying child's not much good in a whorehouse," she said, pushing him a little.

Tom winced. He hated that word. "We'll work something out."

Derek looked alert instantly. "You're going back? What about me?"

"You know what I told you." She stepped around the table. "I said it was them or me. You chose them."

He clumsily tried to grab her but Tom pushed him back in his chair. As they started to step away, Tom gave a last wary glance back to Derek. A change — *the* change described by Curley and alluded to by Cannaro — came over Derek's face. Tom saw the face of a stumbling, unhappy drunk change and reflect something sly and ancient.

Derek half grinned. He stood up and stepped gracefully around the table. He did not appear to move in any hurry but was suddenly *there* in front of Tom.

"She's with me," Derek said easily. Even his voice was different, a throaty purr instead of the nasal whine of a few moments ago.

Tom backed away from him. Derek swung his leg upward gently in a graceful arc toward the side of Tom's head. Surely, Tom thought, he was going to merely touch me to show what he can do, to count coup on me like the Indians in a graceful demonstration of power. In that long moment, Tom felt the demonstration might be all that was necessary, and he would leave this tavern, leave Boston and take the long train home, return to his house without Maggie. He might remember her fondly for a number of years and then, slowly and inevitably, forget her. Yes, he thought of saying, you're right. She's with you.

The cracking pain, the vertigo of being thrown into the air, tumbling backward, the intimate embrace of broken wood, the instant of impact both infinitely brief and interminable that swallowed up everything he could feel or remember feeling, therefore, came as a complete surprise.

First, he felt a hot bruise on the side of his face of an irregular size and shape, not clean and well defined. He thought it might be the shape of a boot. After that, he realized he was thinking these things and understood he'd been unconscious.

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A man helped him from the floor to a chair — a waiter, perhaps? Tom sat there for what seemed like hours. His shoulder hurt from the fall. He moved it, experimentally. There were sharp, inarticulate pains there but nothing felt broken. His ribs hurt when he breathed and his right eye wouldn't focus properly. That gave him the beginnings of a headache, which annoyed him. There was something sticky on his side — he reached around and felt rips in his shirt and jacket. Inside his shirt he felt blood and nearly threw up. Someone took his hand and moved it away.

"Here, now," came a voice still disconnected from anyone he knew. "Let me see if there's anything serious."

Tom came to himself with a start and pulled away. The other people in the tavern had been staring at him. Now that he was awake, they turned away.

Dan was sitting beside him. "I think you were badly cut when the chair broke under you. But I couldn't see your ribs. It didn't seem as if your lungs were punctured. You seem to be able to breathe all right. Anything broken?"

Tom stood up and moved his arms and legs experimentally. "I feel like I've been hit by a truck. Nothing's broken." He looked down at Dan. "You didn't go back to Curley's office."

"Obviously. I wanted to see what happened."

"You got your wish."

Dan smiled ruefully. "So I did."

Prohibition had emasculated the bar but the waiter was still standing behind it, watching him. Tom went to the bar and pulled out a five-dollar note and asked for a glass of water. The waiter looked around and poured something out of sight. The glass placed in front of Tom was at least as clear and colorless as water. Tom sipped it and realized for the first time there were lacerations in his mouth as the alcohol burned them. After a moment, the pain subsided and the warm glow in his stomach remained. In a few minutes, the ache in his shoulder and side dimmed. Another five-dollar note persuaded the bartender to part with a towel and other items Tom used to make a rude bandage, and to dispatch a young boy, who magically materialized at a word, down the street with a new shirt. Once both bandage and shirt were in place, and Tom wore his jacket, the wounds were barely visible.

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"You should see a doctor," Dan said quietly as he joined Tom at the bar.

Tom ordered another drink. He nodded to Dan. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know."

"He didn't seem to know you."

Dan shrugged. "He's crazy. You could tell that. I've known him all his life."

Tom nodded and leaned heavily against the bar. "I think I'll go home."

"You can't do that!" cried Dan.

"Why not?"

"He beat you. Kicked you. Don't you want to go after him?"

"Let's see if I got this straight." Tom sipped his drink. "This man is a robber. Possibly a killer. Certainly a man who can outfight me. He's disappeared and left me somewhat worse for wear." He turned to Dan. "Why don't *you* go after him?"

"I will if you will." Dan looked at him steadily.

"Why do you want to find him?"

Dan stood up straight, no longer the callow youth but appearing to be a man of some substance. "Let's say it is a matter of a debt."

"You owe him something?"

Dan barked a short laugh. "More the other way around."

Tom nodded. "Do you know where he is?"

"Maybe."

"Ah."

The silence lengthened.

"There is the matter of the girl."

Tom sipped the whisky. Or was it gin? It tasted too bad to tell. "What matter?"

"Aren't you after the girl?"

"Am I?"

Dan fidgeted. "I listened while you and Mayor Curley were discussing Derek."

"Ah." Tom swirled the last of the gin — or was it vodka? — and drained it. "Do you have a gun?"

Dan started at that. "A gun?"

"A simple question. Do you?" Tom looked at him tiredly. "I'm never going to let him get within kicking distance of me again."

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"No."

Tom nodded. Dan was sitting close to his right. Tom reached for his glass as if he'd forgotten he'd finished it, made a fist and backhanded Dan with all his strength. Dan fell back off his chair. Tom followed up the blow with a vicious kick to Dan's groin. Dan doubled up and the breath came out of him in a faint shriek. Tom pulled open his coat and found the pistol he knew was there and a small glittering knife he didn't.

"I must thank Derek for reminding me of my roots," he said to Dan. "Tell me. Who are you? Police trying to find Derek for the robbery? One of the mayor's bullyboys? Or are you just trying to cash in on the money?"

Dan didn't answer. Instead, he vomited.

"Kids." He put the barrel of the pistol against Dan's throat. "Where do you think he is?"

"Trolley," Dan croaked. "A Street entrance to the underground."

"Thank you."

"Tell me," said Dan as soon as he was able to breathe. "Do you *know* she's not your daughter?"

"Yes." Tom hid the pistol in his jacket pocket and left the tavern.

"A" Street was near the new Edison plant built not ten years before. A trolley, all sparks and thunder, roared out of the underground and turned down the street when he reached the corner. As he stood there, cold and feeling broken, his own blood marking him, he felt suddenly old. He had avoided violence since he was thirty. He dealt with the satisfaction of men's other appetites. What was he doing here? Then, he imagined Maggie's look of fear and confusion as Derek dragged her out of the tavern. It reminded him of Elisabeth's face when he told her Maggie had left the house. Funny, he thought, Elisabeth would be afraid for her when she left and not when she was there. He couldn't face Elisabeth if he didn't go in after Derek. He would know that even if he never saw Elisabeth again.

Sighing, he walked across the street and began walking along the tracks.

The first thing he noticed was how warm it was, warm like the fetid mud of a swamp, steaming like a stream of urine sprayed against a building on a cold day. He loosened his coat and checked the pistol again. The second thing he noticed was the dampness. The walls were beaded as if sweating and the tracks were red in the dim light and slick. Overhead lines

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powered the trolleys. He was grateful there was no third rail here to make a single arcing flash of him.

It was not as dark as he imagined. At regular intervals appeared an incandescent lamp in a niche in the wall, a votive candle to Edison's electric god. In the distance, he could hear the scraping of steel, the scream of animals in passion followed by the distant thunder of their copulation. He saw a light turn down the tunnels toward him and he stepped into one of the niches in the wall. A trolley wailed around the corner, spat lightning and bounded up the short hill to pass him. He looked through the windows and saw not a blur but a series of perfectly etched still pictures of monstrous faces, of disconnected mouths and noses and sexual organs conjoined by an impression of wild laughter.

Then, it was gone and only the distant groans and shrieks remained. Tom found he was shaking. He felt of the pistol and it calmed him. The things a man's mind might present to him.

It came to him that there must be miles of these tunnels beneath Boston. A man could be lost here for years, living on the water dripping from the filthy streets and a cuisine of rats. It's madness to be down here. Madness to think I can follow him — Derek had been a car man for some time. He must know his way around.

Tom found the pistol in his hand. Madness. He continued to follow downward tracks. In the thick, dank air he felt disoriented. He had no inkling of time. The hypothetical man he'd considered before must be himself, for it felt as if he'd been here all of his life, in a dark chaos shot through with random bestial roars, his way laid out before him and his only choice the scrabbling to a shallow well of safety or standing in place to be struck down and destroyed.

He saw the honest light of a lantern and made for it. Deep in a square block supporting a vaulted ceiling he found a room. In it, sitting on a tall stool, and working a broad bank of switches, levers, and dials, was an old man with the most incredibly gnarled and crippled-looking hands Tom had ever seen. The hands looked as if they had been stepped on and twisted and then healed in place. They seemed to have no effect on the old man's ability and he quickly flicked the metal switches with a sharp snap and pulled the long Bakelite levers smoothly to rest. The knobs of the dials were knurled in swirls and patterns and each meter was individually lit,

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the hair-thin indicators twitching like dancing knives. Next to his stool lay an old black dog, half gray with dust shaken from the walls. The dog regarded him with red, rheumy eyes. The old man seemed unsurprised when Tom stumbled in. He nodded toward a chair as he went on working. The room was at a crossroads of tracks and every few seconds the earth and walls would shake as a trolley rumbled past.

The dog seemed to view Tom with contempt. He stood slowly on ancient, arthritic limbs and went to the door. Two trolleys went past, shaking Tom in his chair and sparking the air with dust. The dog ignored the noise. After the trolleys passed, he stepped outside and urinated against a pillar. Then he came back inside and returned to his station next to the stool. The dog continued to stare at Tom. The passing of the trolleys seemed to mark a resting place in the old man's activities and he turned toward Tom, interlaced his two arthritic hands and cracked his knuckles, snapping them like the switches. The dog growled.

"Don't mind him," said the old man, grinning at Tom's sudden concern. "He hates it when I do that. Pisses him off for some reason. But he's got no interest in eating strangers."

"I'm looking for someone — "

"I bet you are, with your gun and all."

"I haven't got — "

"Hell you haven't! I can see it half falling out of your coat. Having any trouble finding them?"

"Well — "

"Hell, anybody would. If I sold my soul and didn't want the devil to come find me, I'd hide right here. He'd walk right by. You the law?"

"No — "

"Cannaro's boys, maybe? He's lost a good many people down here."

"Not — "

"Did Curley lose somebody down here, f'Chrissake? I thought he took better care of his people than that."

Tom stopped talking and waited. The old man fell silent, still grinning. Each time Tom started to talk, the old man leaned forward, ready to interrupt him. Tom stopped again. The old man leaned back. This went on for four or five minutes until the old man burst out laughing.

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"Go on. I won't stop you," he said, wiping his eyes. "I'm Armstrong DeLuxe." He stuck out his hand.

"Sure you are," said Tom and took it. He had to grip hard just to keep his hand from being crushed.

"No, really. Parents came from Quebec. I don't get much company down here."

I wonder why, thought Tom. "Tom Kelley. I'm looking for Derek Kenny. He came down here. With a woman."

The old man looked interested. "You're looking for Derek. You know anything about him?"

Tom shrugged. "A lot of people are scared of him. He decked me. I'm not really interested in him. I'm looking for the woman."

"Ah," said Armstrong. "Wife?"

"No — "

"Lover, then?"

Tom stopped and stared at him.

Armstrong laughed. "It's irritating but I enjoy it. What the hell else would I do down here but torture visitors, pet my dog, and work? Don't begrudge me my fun. We all do what we must to occupy ourselves until quitting time."

"Have you seen him?" Tom said tiredly.

Armstrong shook his head vigorously. "Not a bit. But that's nothing. There are a thousand paths in these tunnels and only a few of them pass by here. Came down here with a woman, did he? A pretty one, too, I'll bet. And he didn't bring her by to meet me — I'll have to remember to kill the son-of-a-bitch for that the next time I see him. If I do." He looked pointedly at the gun in Tom's pocket.

"I don't wish Derek dead."

Armstrong chuckled. "Nobody wishes anybody dead. They kill them with guns and other things. Nobody ever got killed by wishing."

"Yeah." Tom had had about enough of this. "Thanks." He stood up and started for the door. The dog rose up and stood in the doorway, staring up at him with red eyes.

"Hey, there," said Armstrong behind him. "I didn't say I wouldn't help you. Give me a chance."

"You said you hadn't seen him."

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"Oh, I don't need to see him," he said expansively. "I know where he'll be. There's only one place you can take a girl down here. That's the Mechanics' Club."

Tom was so tired he wanted to weep. "Where's that?"

"Down deep, Mister Kelley," Armstrong said softly. "Way down deep. You got to be sure you want to go all the way before you'll get there. Your mother, lover, daughter, wife, and friend better be worth it."

"She's not any of those. My employee, maybe."

"Then you got to be doubly sure you want to go there."

Tom looked down at his feet. "Yeah."

Armstrong reached out and took Tom's shoulder in a friendly way. "No one's making you. It's a long way down. You don't have to go, friend."

Tom looked at the old man. He felt like he was carrying stones. It would be nice to set them down. He remembered Maggie's face. And Elisabeth's. "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Would she do the same for you?"

Tom shrugged, thinking of the day Maggie came to his house. "Maybe she already did." He straightened his shoulders. "How do I find the Mechanics' Club?"

Armstrong got down from the stool and rummaged in the back, out of sight for a moment. He brought out an old rusty kerosene lamp. The lenses were thick and prismatic and it looked heavy. He raised the lenses and lit the lamp and it sputtered for a moment as he carefully trimmed and adjusted the wick, suddenly looking as fussy and precise as an old schoolteacher. Finally, he lowered the lenses and the room was filled with a lambent, pearly glow. "I know something about the production of light," he said with a satisfied note in his voice.

"My partner," said Armstrong, indicating the hound, "will take you to the tunnels that start toward the Club. They've been abandoned since before the war. No lights down that way. After that, you're on your own. Just keep going down."

"Why are you helping me?"

Armstrong laughed. "Nobody's a secondary character in their own story. I got my reasons same as you. They're just none of your business."

The dog snorted and stepped outside. He stopped in the middle of the tracks and looked back at Tom. In the distance came the faint wail of an

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oncoming trolley. Tom got the strange feeling the dog would wait for him until the trolley came and tore him into little pieces. An image came to him of the dog reassembling itself from its grisly parts and, the look of contempt still on its face, returning to its station next to Armstrong.

Tom, in turn, looked back toward Armstrong but the old man had resumed his work, flicking switches, drawing levers, turning dials.

The dog led him across the tracks as the trolley lights began to brighten the haze. They entered a narrow side tunnel, barely wide enough for the older, smaller cars, as the lights swept over them. The grade downward steepened perceptibly and the two of them began to descend.

THIS TUNNEL WAS clearly different from the ones he had walked through before. The tracks were of a narrower gauge and pitted with rust. The building material itself looked older, more like stone or ancient concrete. White-patched and sandy, the walls looked as if they would have been more at home lining a mausoleum or a long stretch of catacombs. It was damper here, and hotter. Water, beading on the walls or dripping from the walls or ceiling, had been a fixture above. Here, the nature of it was different. The walls varied between being slicked with a viscous slime or completely dry. Water did not bead on the walls at all but broke through in streams. The pale light of the lantern made them glitter. The water had eaten through the tracks in places, making the rusted remains sharp as razors. More than once, he and the dog were forced to ford a stream. One was three feet deep as it tore out of a new riverbed and crossed the tunnel rippingly fast. Beneath the gray waters he could hear the groan and tumble of moving rocks. That one nearly took him with it; a rolling boulder smashed into his ankle. He had a bad moment when the lantern slipped from his hand. The dog caught it and held it until he could make his way across. Even then, he had to bathe his ankle in the icy water to keep it from swelling. For a while he was afraid he'd broken it. But it was only a purple bruise.

Most of these streams crossed the tunnel. One incorporated the trolley bed itself in its channel and they waded some miles as they made their way. Eventually, that river also left the tunnel and the path grew dry and the tracks reappeared.

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The dog accompanied him for hours, staying slightly ahead of Tom. Gradually, the tunnel grew straight and unbroken until Tom realized that the tunnel and the tracks had been straight for some time. He looked around and saw that he was alone. The dog, so silent and dark, had just slipped away. Or, he thought, more likely it had just sat and waited for him to pass and then returned to Armstrong. Tom wondered how the dog would find his way back in the dark without the lantern. He had a feeling the dog would have no trouble.

With the water gone, other sounds of the tunnel asserted themselves: the regular skittering of vermin, a few lone frogs in the darkness, and a constant whispering as if something was trying to make itself understood but couldn't, and therefore couldn't rest comfortably.

The sounds and the solitude dulled him until he forgot everything except the heavy tread of his shoes and the weight of the lantern.

"Why are you here?" came a whisper.

He did not start. The words came so naturally out of the sounds around him he might have expected it.

"Who are you?" he called. There was no answer. He might have been talking to himself and he might have been answering.

"Why are you here?" came the whisper again.

"I'm looking for Maggie."

"Who's Maggie?"

"Someone who might have been my daughter."

More unintelligible whispering.

"Why isn't she?"

"Because I can't have a daughter." He paused for a moment. It seemed as if there was no single person he was talking to; instead, it was the tunnel itself, the tendrils of the city grown down dark and deep here. He was crawling and stumbling between the roots of a tree of great substance. Tom did not feel he could dissemble or hide from such a thing. "I lack the power."

The whispering became unintelligible again.

The lantern showed blockage of the tunnel ahead of him. As he neared it, the obstruction resolved itself into an old trolley. The style reminded Tom of his own youth. These sharp-edged, baroque-styled trolleys looked like nothing more than a gazebo, stretched to fit the tunnel but still

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retaining a gazebo's original edges and grillwork. The trolley fit the tunnel tightly. There was no room on either side of it. The windshield in the front was still intact. He climbed the coupling and brushed the dust from the window and held up the lantern. Inside, the trolley was empty. He could not see to the trolley's other end.

He stepped down from the coupling and found a loose piece of stone. It was heavy, perhaps three or four pounds. He carried it back and shattered the glass. Thick shards flew about him. In blind panic, he held up the lantern to deflect a piece flying toward his eye. After a moment, all was silent again.

"Careful of the glass," came a whisper.

"Thanks," he said dryly.

He crawled through the opening, careful of the glass still in the frame. Inside, the seats and railings were just as he'd remembered when he was a kid. For a moment, he thought that this was in fact the trolley that had run down the heart of Brookline when he was a child, smelling of ozone and hot steel. Beacon Street ran all the way downhill from Summit Avenue where he'd grown up. You could see the trolley come for nearly a mile, a knot of people waiting at each stop. Clothed in different colors, each with his own life, his own costume, but seen from a distance they were like patches in the same quilt, undulating and covering the street as far as he could see.

Tom was not a man given to flights of imagination, but in the pearl light of the lantern, he fancied he could see people he had known sitting in the trolley's seats. Giapetto, the Italian kid across Beacon, who insisted on being called George. Martin, the Jewish kid, who had to come out with them on the sly so his parents didn't find out. And, Fariz, the boy from Syria. He had been older than the rest of them. Fariz, who was dead. Next to Fariz was himself. Christ, had he ever been so young? Wasn't he an altar boy then? Not that it had made much difference. He'd brought them all along with him. Giapetto had shown them the way. Martin had figured out how to do it. Fariz had the muscle and Tom the will.

Let's see. Giapetto was no doubt still working in the North End. Martin had disappeared afterward. Tom had run to Hopkinton and Fariz had ended up in the morgue. Not bad for the night's work of four young men.

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Tom shook his head. That was thirty years past, almost. Who knew where they might be now?

His eyes stung and he wiped them. He moved to the back of the trolley. The tunnel widened here slightly, connecting with a natural cavern. He forced the rear door open and stepped down easily. The tracks continued, the spikes pounded into solid rock. The cavern opened out, tall and broad. Great stalagmites and stalactites welded the base and roof of the cavern together with pillars of flowing quartz. The cavern clearly showed the marks of flowing water. Now, dust stirred as Tom walked and the air was dry and hot. He could hear a distant pounding of machinery, or war, or music.

The tracks led on until the cavern narrowed again and then led to a broad, oaken double door, perhaps twenty feet wide and fifteen feet high; the size of a trolley. The pounding was muffled music and clearly came from behind the door. Tom pushed at the door. Initially it resisted but gradually, silently, as if oiled, the door swung inward. He passed inside.

Here cobblestones braced the track and the corridor was lined with brick. The passageway was short and where the tracks stopped, the cavern opened out in a large room filled with people. Along one edge of the room was a dark crevasse whose depth was hidden in shadow. On the other, a long bar made of ivory which had obviously never acceded to Prohibition. Between the crevasse and the bar were tables and chairs. The pounding was a band playing drums and bagpipes — Irish pipes, he saw — rendering a chaotic version of "Sweet Adeline." The drums had been made of great wine casks and threatened to drown out even the bagpipes.

The people were mostly men wearing mechanics' coveralls, dirty and covered with the stains of oil and coal. From that, Tom knew this must be the Mechanics' Club. The few women had the look of well-paid prostitutes. The room smelled of oil and coal, hot steel cut with fire.

No one noticed him and he dimmed the lantern and made his way to the bar. He could not see Derek in the press. The crowd was populated with edgy and dangerous men, men who had come here after a day of pounding iron and handling fire, burning their skin and singeing their hair. All had scars of one sort or another. The man standing to one side of Tom had one hand horribly burned and the man on the other had lost an eye.

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Neither man seemed particularly debilitated but downed their drinks in a murderous silence.

The barkeep delivered a shot glass of amber fluid without being asked and left without asking for pay. Tom figured in a place like this there would be many ways to pay. He drained the glass in one gulp and then held onto the bar for a full minute to get his breath back. Thus fortified, he leaned toward the one-eyed man.

"I'm looking for Derek Kenny. And a woman."

The man grunted and didn't answer. Tom turned and repeated his question to the man with the burned hand.

He didn't answer immediately. "You her father?" he asked quietly.

It was Tom's turn to take his time answering. "Maybe," he said finally.

The man nodded. "Took her virtue and all that, eh?"

"Just tell me where to find him."

"You can't see him? Look over by the end of the tracks."

Tom slowly turned and looked in the indicated direction. For a moment, the people all blurred together and he couldn't see individual faces, only the colors of clothes, the geometric shapes of the chairs and tables, the blurred masks of faces. Then, emerging, taking on outline and form, a transition of state like steel being drawn from stone or flame blossoming from gasoline, came a face he knew: Maggie's. She didn't see him. Her attention was wholly focused on Derek sitting next to her. Tom watched her face. He could not see any influence from her father's side of the family, but it was obvious Elisabeth's face had served as a foundation for Maggie's own. Tom could see the same curve of the jaw. The straight line of her mouth so apparently set and then so fluid as she laughed or smiled. Her eyes came directly from Elisabeth without any intervening genetic dilution and showed only her mother's deep ocean blue.

Maggie was smiling, a deep loving smile, toward Derek. Her eyes were vacant.

Derek was playing cards, his hands a blur. He was grinning. With a start, Tom realized that Derek was grinning at him. Maggie might not have noticed Tom but Derek was not so oblivious. The meaning of his expression was crystal clear: Kill me if you can or I'll consume her completely.

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Tom stood slowly and tiredly. There was no help for it, then. He strode over toward Derek. As if by silent communication the crowds parted from them. Derek calmly folded his hand and moved his chair back, rose. Tom reached for his gun and pulled it out. He pointed it at Derek. Maggie's gaze turned to Tom and her eyes grew wide and excited. Tom pointed the gun at Derek and pulled the trigger. The gun felt jammed or his finger paralyzed. He couldn't pull the damned trigger. Derek continued grinning. He stepped to Tom as Tom futilely pulled at the intransigent trigger.

Derek pushed away the gun.

Tom said: "I don't want to die."

Derek chuckled and slapped Tom across the face, breaking his neck. A lightning bolt of pain crackled from the base of Tom's skull all the way down his back and was swallowed up in a silent void and suddenly Tom could no longer feel his legs. Derek picked Tom up over his head and threw him high in the air.

Tom struck the side of the cavern and fell twenty feet into the crevasse at the edge of the passageway.

BROKEN AND BLEEDING in the dark, he could feel a numb weakness come over him. He was going to die. And why not? And why shouldn't he? Hadn't he left Elisabeth? Hadn't he killed Fariz? When Fariz shot him and he had shot Fariz simultaneously and he had woken up after days of hot pain to discover himself castrated, hadn't he wanted to die? Hadn't he felt he deserved to die?

"Not yet," came a whisper from the stones around him.

"Who are you?" he said thickly.

He felt a cold hand touching him. "You've met me before."

Tom looked up and saw a face formed from differing shades of shadow. It seemed familiar. "Dan," he said, knowing it was true. "Dan Itchwater," he repeated.

"Yes."

There was more to the face than he'd seen before, a beard. Glasses. "And Armstrong."

"Yes."

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"Who are you?" he asked again. Death had receded for a moment.

"Your friend. Your partner. I told you, I have my own agenda."

"Why?" He thought for a moment. "Derek? Who is he?"

"He could be a man who made a deal. A standard deal for the adoration by women and bodily power. You know the terms. Say, then, when the terms of the contract are due, he might flee to a place where the contract is superseded by an older, stronger agreement. Or, he could be a man possessed by something greater than himself, a demon or madness. Or, he could be a man who is burning the fire of his entire life in one roaring pyre and not expecting to live much longer."

Tom didn't speak for a moment. "What do you want with me?"

"This is an opportunity, Tom," came the voice. "Remember what you said to Jake: You would brave hellfire for her."

"How — ?"

"You bring your life along with you, Tom. I can read it."

"They were words," he said bitterly.

"You can make them more than words."

Tom looked up into the indistinct shadows. "You want me to sell you my soul?"

"Why would I want that?"

"You said Derek had sold his soul."

"I said he might have."

"And you want me to kill him for you, right? Well, then tell me the truth."

There was a pause. "The truth is you're a man who murdered his best friend in a fit of greed and excitement and took the profits to start a whorehouse. If there is a Hell and I'm the devil, I have controlling interest in your soul right now. The truth is you've failed miserably trying to get Maggie away from a man who will almost certainly kill her before he's through. The truth is, your neck, half your ribs, and one leg are broken. Your left kidney and bladder are ruptured and the sharp point of one of your broken ribs has sliced your pancreas. You're bleeding to death on the inside. The only reason you don't feel the pain is that your spinal cord has been severed and the wee sparks that carry messages of pain can't make their delivery. The truth is, you're dying and soon to be dead, and in the face of that you have an opportunity."

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"What do you want?"

"How far will you go? Do you want to die here? Or do you want to live? Do you want to save Maggie or do you want to see her waste away as Derek consumes her? What is she worth to you, Tom? What is your own life worth to you?"

"What'll it cost me?"

"That's up to you."

"What? You'll *give* me my life back?" He snorted weakly. "I don't believe you."

"There is no such thing as a gift, Tom. Sometimes the cost is known. Sometimes it isn't. Some people don't live long enough to pay it back and never know the cost. Some learn instantly."

"I'm not scared of dying anymore," he said to the voice. The voice did not reply. After a long time, Tom said: "But I want to live. I want Maggie to live. I'll pay what it costs."

He felt cold hands straighten his spine and set his head properly on his neck. He shrieked with the pain. He felt hands take his broken ribs and weld them together, felt them draw closed the broken and leaking blood vessels and organs inside him, felt them straighten his crooked leg. After a long, interminable period where there was no distinguishable perception but pain, no sense but agony, he came to himself on all fours, puking and crying. Tom wiped his eyes and his mouth and looked around. There was no face near him he could see. But the gun was on the ground near him. He picked it up.

He climbed out of the crevasse onto the bricks and leaned against the wall. After a moment to steady himself, he pushed himself erect and again looked around the room. Derek had returned to his chair. Maggie was seated near him but turned away. She was crying. Over him? Tom wondered. He hoped so.

Tom threaded his way back toward Derek. Derek saw him and looked confused for a moment, then grinned. Again, he stood up and walked toward Tom. Again, Tom lifted the gun. For a moment, the trigger jammed again. What the hell, thought Tom. He can only kill me.

The trigger released and the gun roared and Derek's face disappeared in an explosion of red and gray. Derek's body kept walking for a moment.

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Tom fired again, walking toward him. He fired into Derek's head, his chest, his belly. He kept firing into his back when Derek had fallen to the ground. He fired until the gun was empty. Then, he dropped the gun on the body and stepped over him to Maggie.

"Let's go home"

She didn't answer but nodded.

He held her hands and looked back to the crowd. He saw Dan watching.

"Go on deeper in the cave. That's the way home," said Dan, and gave him the lantern.

Tom led Maggie, unresisting, deeper in the cave. The way was straight and unbranched, like a tunnel. After a while, it began to ascend and Tom could feel fresh air. There were ruins of old structures pinned to the wall with spikes and lathered with concrete: old mining platforms, the shelves of root cellars, the layered bunks of an old bed. The cave narrowed to just a couple of feet across. They turned beneath a more recent stairway and came out from under it into the basement of Tom's house. The floor was wet and Tom could hear the croaking of the frogs. He could see the glittering gold of their eyes as they regarded him from the flooded corners. Tom looked back and saw nothing but the other side of the basement.

At that point, by mutual silent consent, they went up the stairs, through the house to the front porch. It must have either been Sunday or near dawn, since there was no activity in the house and no one about. Tom had no idea what day it was. The moon was full and the light clear.

Maggie started weeping. She didn't say a word but buried her head on his shoulder. For a long time, he and Maggie sat in the cool light of the moon. He was afraid of what she might say. He had, after all, killed her lover and the father of her child right in front of her.

"Are you my father?" she said at last.

"Do you want me to be?"

"Yes."

He looked at her. "Why?"

"Because my mother loved you so much. She never loved Pete. He didn't love her."

"Do you love him?"

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"No. He never loved me, either. I always figured it was because I was your child."

Not sure how to proceed, he stroked her hair. "Why did you want to sleep with me?"

"I didn't."

"Come again?"

"I wanted to be loved by you. Like the way I thought you loved Mama. Like the way you might love me if I was your daughter." She looked up at him. "If I had to sleep with you for it to happen, that was all right with me."

Tom let her go so he could see her. "When I was twenty, me and three friends robbed the State Street Bank. We got away with it and hid out in a Quincy basement. We hid there for a month and went nearly crazy with fear and boredom. I got into a fight with my best friend and we shot each other. I killed him and he — well, there wasn't much left of me down there. Enough to make a showing but not enough to make it count." He took her shoulders and stared straight at her. "Honey, if me and Elisabeth could have made you, we would, whatever Pete Bowker said. But we couldn't. So I left and started up the house."

"Then you aren't my father."

Tom didn't say anything for a minute. He lifted her blouse put his hand on her round belly and caressed it. She started and stiffened in surprise.

Strange, he thought, in other circumstances he could touch a woman here and it would be a prelude to things occurring further down. But here, now, he didn't feel that way at all. "When I was twenty I thought I couldn't be hurt. The robbery put paid to that idea. Then I thought I'd never grow old. But I figured that one out eventually. Then I thought I might not die. Derek showed me the error of my ways tonight, and I accepted it. I'm not afraid of it anymore." He moved his hand over the roundness of her belly, feeling the pulsing warmth of it. "You know? This makes dying seem not so bad."

He pulled his hand away, lifted his gaze and looked deep in her eyes. "I'll be any kind of father you need. If you want me."

She broke off looking at him and cried again. Then, with a small laugh, she said, "If the kid can't have a father, he ought to at least have a grandfather."

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They held each other until daylight. At first light he considered where he was. Two miles east and he would be at Jake's tree. A mile west and he would be at the lake. Boston, and everything about it, seemed half a world away. This house and the two of them were the center of everything.

HE WAS LEANING his elbows on his knees when I finished. He looked up at me, his eyes red and rheumy with years of dissipation, cigarette smoke, and waiting. He nodded to himself and then looked again to the ground. We must have sat there for ten minutes or so. I watched him closely. At one point — to the crackling sound of a tree freezing or the neighbor's cat creeping through the woods — I looked away. When I looked back, he was gone. There was a small pile of cigarette butts on the ground next to where he had been sitting.

I sat a bit longer. It was long before dawn. The sky was as clear as if it had been etched into a great glass bowl. I could pick out Orion and the Pleiades. It was a winter sky, but soon, Ursa Major would replace Orion in prominence and summer would be here. My son would be a summer baby, born under the warmth of the bear.

Benjamin was born in June. Mother and child were healthy, which is the only true measure of success in these things. I never saw Tom again, though I occasionally find an anonymous cigarette butt or a footprint in the woods near the house. Anybody could have left them.

The rest of Tom's life was relatively uneventful. Maggie stayed in the house until her daughter, named Veronique after the woman Ethel, was born. Mother and child were healthy. She then moved back in with her mother. There was a little scandal over this but it died down after the crash of 1929 put it in perspective. The Depression began and Prohibition ended. Elisabeth Bowker died and Maggie reopened the rooming house.

Tom's house continued to operate for a few years more until Tom was killed under mysterious circumstances. He was apparently shot during an argument. Some say the argument was over a woman, though I find this unconvincing. Others say the Boston crime families killed him to take over the house. One man from Ashland told me that according to his father, the man who had killed Tom was his old friend Gerald Monahan.

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The two had been drunk and argued which of them was on the more intimate terms with the devil. Tom was convinced that this was one subject where he was truly knowledgeable but the argument got out of hand.

Tom was not mourned by anyone in Hopkinton except Maggie. He had been vilified too many times for that. His will left Maggie everything he had, which turned out to be considerable wealth. She settled things with the girls, sold the house to the Burtts, and took her daughter out west to Illinois. The Burtts sold the house to the Smiths. The Smiths sold it to us.

I heard once from a minister that one's duties were to choose good, expose evil, and bear witness. I don't know why Tom Kelley visited me in the final months before the birth of my son. Still, I can easily see why a ghost might haunt the living. They need something from us. It could be just a kind word, revenge, or to be reassured they have not been forgotten, or to see how their children or their home survived. It is we, the living, who are limited in what we can do for the dead. We can only tell our own versions of their stories, broken and twisted as they are, back to them, to show them who they were, where they were, and what they did. To remind them that though they are no longer living we still come from them and therefore they can never be truly dead. We must choose the good we can, expose the evil we know, and, ultimately, bear witness.

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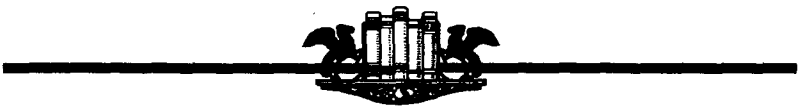

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

From the Corner of His Eye, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2000, $26.95.

ONE EXPECTS to meet some good people in a Koontz novel and *From the Corner of His Eye* proves to be no exception. One also expects a seriously unpleasant villain and the novel delivers on that count, too. What's different here is how much time Koontz (and therefore we, the readers) spend in the latter's company.

The sociopathic antagonist of this novel (I'd tell you his name but that would spoil a kicker of a scene at the beginning of the book) is as self-centered and amoral as the psychological designation I've given him, and Koontz is dead-on in his depiction of the man. From the casual murders he commits, to the minutiae that fill his days, there's not a single false note.

This antagonist is a far cry from some of the (unfortunately) popular versions of such men to be found in callous books like *American Psycho* or *Hannibal*. And therefore he's much more realistic. He's not cultured and Sherlock Holmes-brilliant. Rather, as one of the characters in the book puts it, "The problem with movies and books is they make evil look glamorous, exciting, when it's no such thing. It's boring and it's depressing and it's stupid. Criminals are all after cheap thrills and easy money, and when they get them, all they want is more of the same, over and over. They're shallow, empty, boring people who couldn't give you five minutes of interesting conversation if you had the piss-poor luck to be at a party full of them. Maybe some can be monkey-clever some of the time, but they aren't hardly ever *smart*."

Though they usually, as the antagonist here does, think they are. Smarter, more cultured, more *deserving* of the good things in life because, well, it's owed to them, isn't it?

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Now, more often than not in a Dean Koontz novel, there's equal time given to one, sometimes a couple, of strong positive characters, but as I've said, that isn't the case here. There are certainly many admirable, likable characters, but our time away from the antagonist is divided between them. There isn't the same singular focus on a good character as there is on the evil one.

This would normally trouble me since, as I mentioned in last issue's column, I'd just as soon not spend a lot of time in the company of such people — either in real life, or in the pages of a book. And as I got well into *From the Corner of His Eye* and realized how much time I was spending with the antagonist, I remember thinking to myself, do I really want to be reading this?

So much focus on this antagonist. And then these good people, some of them dying at his hand.

But I'm glad I kept reading because by the time I got to the end of this latest novel of Koontz's, I found myself filled with what I think is his greatest gift: the ability to infuse the reader with a profound sense of goodness and hope. Not sickly-sweet goodness, or mind-numbing hope, but a strong positive belief that there is much good to be found in the world and the people with whom we share it.

Considering how dark the morning paper or evening news can make our day with their endless parades of disasters, large and small, this is no small gift indeed.

One last comment. The thing that keeps a discussion of Koontz's work relevant to our genre is that invariably the basis of his books grows out of a well-reasoned speculation based on some element of cutting edge science. In this case, he takes on quantum physics and he does a fabulous job of it as well.

Hawk's Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: Series & Sequels, by Pat Hawk, Hawk's Enterprises, 2001, $55.95.

Ever wanted to know if a favorite book had a sequel — and how many? Or you like a TV show or movie and want to know if their stories are continued in a series of books?

If you have, then this is the book for you.

It's exhaustively comprehensive with titles listed from the 1700s through to the year 2000, each entry providing title, publisher, date of release, and by-line, including real names if known. The material

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covers most of the British Commonwealth and the States, and has cross-over referencing to mystery, historical and romance series.

Mind you, you'd have to be a real bibliophile or scholar to actually want to own this. But it's an excellent reference volume and one you might consider convincing your local library to carry.

The Crow: Wicked Prayer, by Norman Partridge, HarperCollins, 2000, $13.

I read this franchise novel for much the same reason I did the Buffy book discussed a few columns ago: I like the author and it's the kind of novel that will provide a stand-alone experience. Because of the way the Crow books are set up (the mythical Crow of James O'Barr's creation revives an unjustly murdered soul so that he or she can have their vengeance), there's plenty of room for character growth and original story.

In some ways I wasn't disappointed. There are many powerful scenes in this book, and I particularly liked the backstory of the protagonist: Dan Cody, murdered by a pair of amoral goth-punks while trying to rescue his girlfriend Leticia Dreams the Truth Hardin. But while the story of how the two met, how the loner that Cody was is befriended by Dr. Emily Carlisle, an arachnologist with the University of Arizona, how Carlisle plays matchmaker between Cody and Hardin, is wonderful, unfortunately, it takes up all too few pages of the book.

The novel begins with Cody on his way to Hardin's store, an engagement ring in his pocket and a proposal in his heart. Enter Kyra Damon and Johnny Church, the aforementioned sociopaths who have an animated shrunken head named Raymondo hanging from the mirror of their car, and the story turns ferociously cruel and doesn't much ease up again.

Partridge is like Joe Lansdale in many respects. He'll go as over-the-top at times as he thinks the story requires. I've appreciated his work in the past, and I'm sure I will again in the future, but this particular outing was just too unrelentingly brutal for my tastes.

Through Shattered Glass, by David B. Silva, Gauntlet Publications, 2000, $40.

Unless you were a subscriber to the small-press zine *The Horror Show*, or presently subscribe to

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Hellnotes Newsletter (for more info on it, check out: www.hellnotes.com), you might not recognize editor David Silva's name. It's true that he had a few novels published in the late eighties/early nineties, and has had stories in a number of respected magazines and anthologies (from which the stories here are collected), but he has never been a prolific author.

And that's a pity because he's one of the better writers we have working in — I want to say the horror field, but that seems a somewhat limiting description. While he certainly plays the spooky/supernatural card, the real horrors in his stories come from cancers and Alzheimer's, from broken trusts and broken hearts and all the other unhappy hurts with which we can be afflicted.

His characters are ordinary, everyday people — just like you or me. He treats them with respect and writes from their points of view with affection — even those who are the most damaged. Hope isn't always present in his stories, but honesty is, and he certainly doesn't need to turn up the gore factor to make his points or get our attention. And he doesn't do so either.

I'm hard put to pick a favorite, but if pressed, I'd have to say it's "Dry Whiskey," with its spot-on portrayal of loyalty even in the face of seemingly insurmountable sorrow and loss. Like Springsteen says in his classic "Highway Patrolman," "Man turns his back on his family, well he just ain't no good."

But then there's "Dwindling," in which the oldest boy in a family watches his siblings disappear from the family history, one by one, and knows his own time is coming.

Or the cancer victim in "Metastasis" who realizes that her body is more unhappy with her cure than the initial disease.

To be honest, there wasn't a bad story in here. They range from very good to astonishingly so, and my only word of advice would be to read them one at a time, rather than one after the other, all in a row, because they're powerful, moving pieces and you might well need time to recover your mental and emotional equilibrium before going on to the next.

But they are glorious examples of how high we can aim and succeed with meaningful fiction in this genre of ours.

I know, I know. I'm raving. But I can't help it. I've read many of these stories in their original appearances and rereading them here only reiterates my initial opinion

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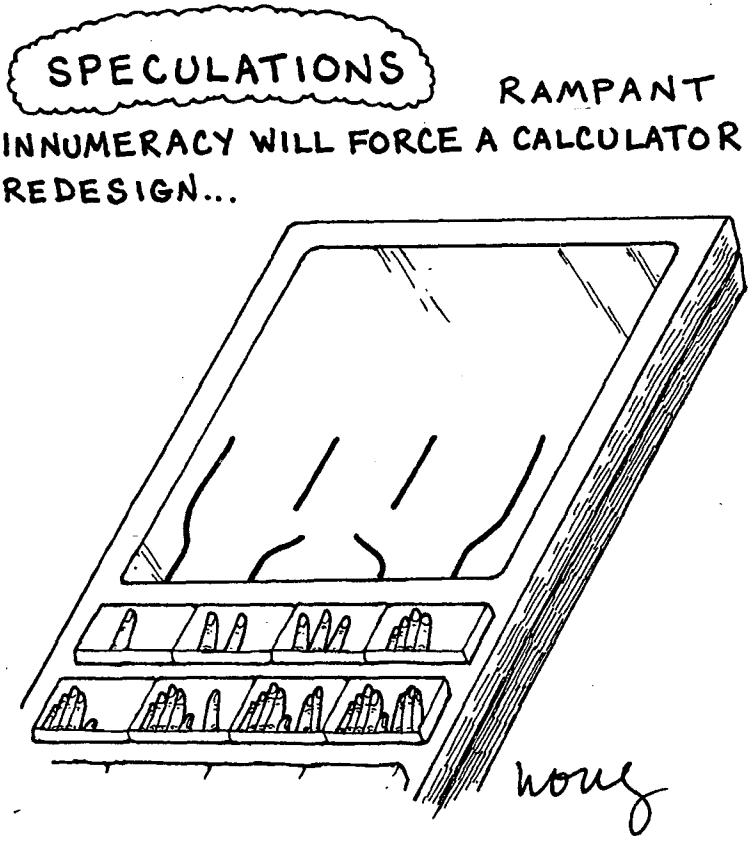
as to just how good an author Silva is.

Need proof? Check out this first collection of his for yourself.

(A quick note: I'm reviewing this from a bound galley, but I assume that the finished book, which is in a signed/limited edition and has an introduction by Dean Koontz, will be up to Gauntlet Press's usual high standards.)

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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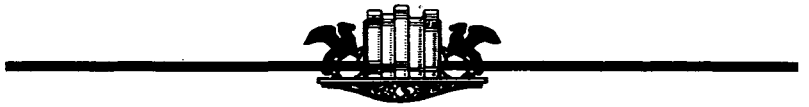

MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Falling Stars, by Michael Flynn, Tor, 2001, $25.95.

Abandon in Place, by Jerry Oltion, Tor, 2000, $24.95.

Eternity's End, by Jeffrey A Carver, Tor, 2000, $26.95.

I THINK IT goes without saying — but I'm saying it anyway — that people read for different reasons. Even mine swing widely, as inclination is often based on a number of telling things: How much sleep I've gotten lately (none, due to my son's second year molars), how much I've been fretting over the "little things" in life (lots), and how generally stressful the universe conspires to be in February, that month of sunless cold. During these times, I tend to reach for the nearest Pratchett (if there is one that I haven't read).

But this time, for reasons that seemed much more sensible a couple of months ago, I decided that I would do something different. I generally tend to review fantasy novels with the occasional foray into social sf, so I picked up a bunch of sf novels with the intent of reading them and providing some sort of overview here.

However, inclination and novels mixed poorly in this case, and of the seven books in the read-for-review pile, I could only actually make my way through three. On the surface of things, they all sounded interesting; they ran the gamut from the viability and necessity of space flight in the near future on the one end, to the interstellar fall of empires as the more mythic tropes of space opera — predestiny, possibly transcendence for and of the human race — came into play. Each of these scenarios presents a challenge to the intrepid writer: In near-future sf, if you can't actually pay attention to the world around you enough to engage in *intelligent* speculation — evoking politics, economic forces, technological trends

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as well as the things that any novel needs in terms of characterization and story — you lose me in the first chapter. I don't actually care if you're a fortune teller; you don't have to predict the outcome of the universe accurately. But I have to feel, reading your work, that this is a reasonable outcome, given your assumptions. In the broader, pangalactic space sf, clashing ideologies, cultures and civilizations have to be drawn distinctly enough that they feel real. I assume that FTL travel is somehow possible in the far future; that humanity has indeed gone out and colonized from here to eternity without wiping himself out along the way, and that planets are fairly homogenous (I know this is stretching it, but it's part of the willing suspension of disbelief). Here, though, character and archetype are necessary, as is the ability to create the alien.

I started with seven novels. In one case, the book was actually very good, but it wasn't sf; it was a well-researched, well-thought-out near-past historical. In one case, there was nothing at all wrong with the book itself, but I drifted, unable to anchor myself. In some cases, the line-by-line writing was clunky; everything — internal monologue, external description, and hearty dialogue — was just slightly off, as if poor stage directions had been given when it came time to create character and mood. This is no doubt me being overly sensitive; I notice that what I consider to be clunky is often excused with ease by the customers at the bookstore where I work as long as the story itself is solid. I, as a reader, often can't get past the words to the story; words are part of what I read for, and I don't demand that they be invisible — although invisible is preferable to clunky.

That left me with three novels.

I started with the Flynn. *Falling Stars* is a good place to start, and it follows on the heels of *Firestar*, *Rogue Star*, and *Lodestar*. Since it is billed as the climax of an "epic of the near future," I'm going to assume that this is the last of the books, and that's too damn bad, because Flynn has done something with this series that I hadn't quite expected, given the tone, scope, and conclusion of that first novel. (As an aside, if you haven't read *Firestar*, and you like golden-age sf of the Heinlein variety, you owe it to yourself to hunt that novel down and read it. Even if you don't like that particular brand of sf, you *still* owe it to yourself to hunt it down; Flynn takes the gung-ho man-against-the-

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universe themes of earlier books and strips them of the naiveté that make them such hard sells in the much wearier world of the present-day millennium. In particular, his ability to lay out two sides of a difficult debate, and to inject as little judgment as possible into the lives of the people who live across the divide, make the book less of a soapbox than it might otherwise have been in less competent — I'm tempted to say less wise — hands. Although the general consensus is that the science is damn good, which is good because there's a lot of it, all near-future, I was more taken by other elements of the novel; it's one of the few that I've recommended successfully to most any type of reader at the bookstore. Okay, end of digression.)

Rogue Star was a darker, grimmer work, and *Lodestar* was also lacking in cheer. But what made those books work — for me — was the way Flynn continued to develop the characters that he didn't kill off. In most series, characters' lives continue, but the personalities of those characters don't usually change. They *react*, and if they undergo enough, their reactions are fixed in place, visible emotional scars that form a geography of sorts, a short-form. But they don't truly change.

Flynn's characters change. They change with time. They age, and they age into a wisdom that speaks to and of experience. Youthful, fiery characters grow into a more weary, less vibrant age; some lose the fire of their ideals to the practicality of life — paying mortgages, feeding children — and some lose the practicality of life because the ideals are the life they've chosen. Take a snapshot of any of the continuing characters — Mariesa, the woman who started it all with her intense passion for learning, for education, for space — over the years and they are distinctly different — enough so that without the history behind them, you might never recognize them as the same people.

Which is true to life, but is seldom engaging enough to hold onto readers who come back to a series seeking that connectivity with the characters they admired the first time out. Flynn makes it work. Add to that his deft handling of economic and political forces in a way that makes them feel organic rather than hastily tacked on, and his equally deft handling of the speculative near-future science, and you have a bunch of books that I'm very surprised never made it to more award ballots. Flynn isn't a poet, but his dialogue and his interior

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monologues have a very solid, realistic feel to them that grounds the novel perfectly.

So. In *Falling Stars*, Flynn returns us to a world which is in the grips of a recession because of the events of the previous novel. Unfortunately, what with elections coming up, the news that an asteroid — a very big, very dangerous rock embedded with alien equipment — is on a course for collision with Earth in a short six years doesn't seem to have made an indelible mark upon either the electorate or the politicians; there is *no* funding for a space program that is the only hope of averting a major disaster which many people privately consider to be a hoax. Mariesa Van Huyten, who feels justifiably responsible for the coming disaster, once again begins to lead the way, first by approaching the rich and the powerful among her circle and then by approaching the "children" of her earlier crusade — Jimmy Poole, computer hacker and social misfit, Chase Coughlin, reformed high school thug, Roberta, Hobie.

Old anxieties, old enmities, old friendships are examined as the people whose lives have touched, and been touched by, the Van Huyten legacy, come forward to accept the responsibility of saving the world.

And why did I like this book? Why did it hold my attention at the moment when attention is running a strong deficit? Not, in the end, because of anything I've said so far, although it's all true, but because Flynn's concept of personal responsibility and duty for its own sake strikes a really strong chord in me. Do the good guys always win? No. What makes them good *isn't* winning; it's struggling. It's the struggle that's the defining characteristic.

Okay, I confess that I have not read Jerry Oltion's Nebula Award-winning novella, "Abandon in Place." I was probably hunkering down in the "two children *are* twice as much work, what the heck was I thinking??" bunker during the time of its win. I picked up the novel, therefore, with no real clue what it was about, and I approached it as a novel.

It caught my attention immediately; it was accessible, and it had a bittersweet sense of loss and nostalgia which I'll admit up front I'm a sucker for. If I had to guess, I'd say that the first of the four sections was the bulk of the short story, because the first of the four balances that nostalgia with the reality of

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the world in an effective way. I mean, ghost spaceships that begin to launch on disused NASA spacepads after the death of Neil Armstrong? There's something about that image that speaks to the loss of idealism and fervor about the space program as if the space program *were* our youth. It's almost perfect.

But it's also an almost perfect image for a short piece. It creates a mood that it can sustain, and it evokes emotions based on that mood that can also be sustained.

Rick Spencer is a NASA pilot. The woman he loves, one Tessa McClain, is also a NASA pilot. They've seen — as has anyone with eyes and a television — the ghost Saturn V's in their graceful and silent sojourn toward the abandoned Moon. But those ships prove less ghostly in the face of radar; they *are* real, and they can be tracked, up to a certain point. And what do you do with a real ship? Well, in the end, you pilot it.

Did this happen with alarming ease? Did the characters in question accept just a little bit too easily the existence of ghost spaceships and the risk of trusting their solidity enough to attempt a lunar landing? Well, yes. But I could live with that suspension of disbelief because there was a lot of heart in it. But it didn't end there. Let's just say that there's a paranormal explanation for everything, and that in the end the two characters above wind up doing a lot more that's a lot less believable.

I finished the novel, but the further removed I was from the initial image, the initial emotions evoked by that ghost flight, the less comfortable I was with the territory I'd wandered into. Perhaps it's because I'd expected the real world to be more grounded than it was — that I had expected one strange thing, not a plethora. Perhaps it was because I don't really have much interest in superhero comic books anymore (although yes, I read all of the John Byrne/Chris Claremont X-Men in my time, and still own them). Or perhaps it's because the novel looks like an sf novel, but it's a fantasy novel, one in which the power of positive (or negative) thinking can literally work, and rework, miracles in a hand-over-fist fashion.

I think that we all have our blind spots; we're all willing to accept a specific kind of implausibility. I, for instance, have no difficulty whatsoever accepting the fact that magic — often in great quantities — exists *when I read fantasy* —

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but if more than a passing streak of magic inserts itself into any sf I'm reading, I react with Martin Gardner-like suspicion and annoyance. I'm a conditioned reader. In setting the novel — with its clear and abundant references to the Space Program — in a world in which sf tropes are in clear evidence, Oltion unintentionally invoked some hardening of the attitudes in me as a reader; I expected the world — aside from that single haunting and unusual nostalgic refrain — to be the normal, logical backdrop against which the strange would be brought to sharp relief.

Instead, the normal fell away in large chunks from the book until only the strangeness, shorn of nostalgia and shorn of the power to invoke it, was all that remained; magic, essentially, worked, even if it was called something entirely different.

I think the intent of the book was to be a statement about the power of positive thinking, of belief in others and one's self. In this day and age, that's not a terrible intent; it just didn't work for me. It may for others.

The last novel is *Eternity's End*, by Jeffrey A. Carver.

Of the three, it's set farthest in the future, and of the three, it's the closest to all-out Space Opera; once it starts — with a very unfortunate Renwald Legroeder, an escaped slave who *also* happens to be a Star Rigger, a pilot who can maneuver in the Flux that powers interstellar travel — it picks up speed and doesn't really stop. There is a grand conspiracy, which is pretty obvious from the moment that Legroeder is framed for the loss of a ship to the Golen space pirates from whom he managed to escape; there are helpful friends — in particular Harriet, a lawyer whose grandson was on the ship that Rigger Legroeder was flying when the Pirates struck, and who has never given up hope of finding him; and there are inscrutable aliens, allies whose loyalties are always in question, and century-old injustices, all of which lead — in the end — to space battles that feature big, fast weapons and seat-of-the-pants flying maneuvers that save the day.

There's a ghost ship in this novel as well, but it's not a Saturn V; it's a ship called *Impris*, and its appearance, with its strong emergency beacon, was the siren call that led Renwald's first ship to its doom. If he can find that ship — a ship that no one believes exists — he can prove his innocence. But where is the ship? In Pirate space.

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And Legroeder has seven years' worth of reasons why he never wants to go back....

This sounds glib. But there are two passages in the book that actually surprised me — that made me stop for a minute, with a vast, perfect picture spreading out slowly across the horizon of my internal vision. This might be what people refer to as Sense of Wonder. I almost never have it, and therefore read sf for other reasons, but when it does strike, it's like a large window that opens into another world with unsettling clarity.

Those who've read the Star Rigger novels will be happy to see Carver's return to that universe; those who haven't, but who have a yen for Space Opera, replete with Aliens and unusual FTL travel, won't get lost in the shuffle; the novel is self-contained.

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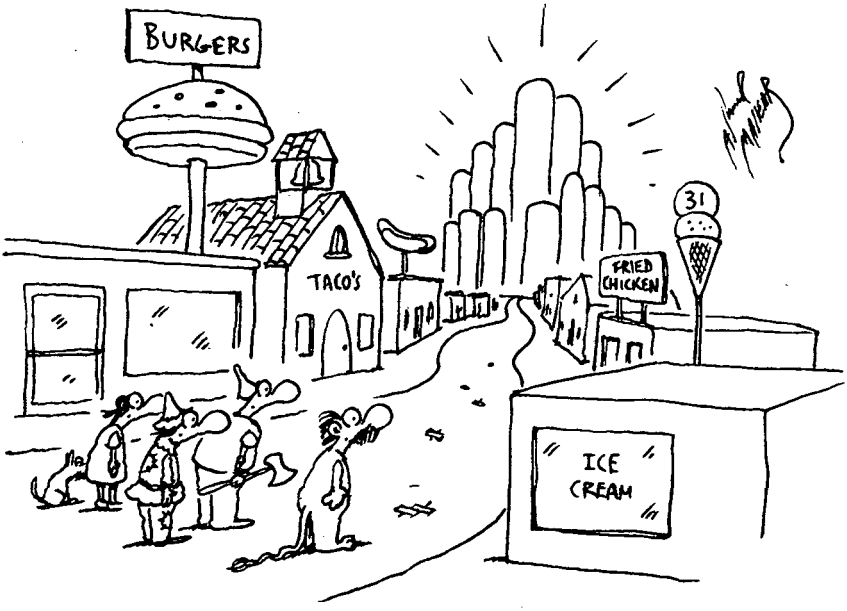

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A native of Arlington, Virginia, Benjamin Rosenbaum now lives in Basel, Switzerland with his wife Esther and their baby daughter Aviva. He says he survived several years of working on multimedia and Internet startups in the US before heading overseas, where he is now employed as a programmer in the banking industry. This savvy story—his first freelance sale—shows that he learned a trick or three during his days on the electronic frontier.

The Ant King: A California Fairy Tale

By Benjamin Rosenbaum

SHEILA SPLIT OPEN AND THE air was filled with gumballs. Yellow gumballs. This was awful for Stan, just awful. He had loved Sheila for a long time, fought for her heart, believed in their love until finally she had come around. They were about to kiss for the first time and then this: yellow gumballs.

Stan went to a group to try to accept that Sheila was gone. It was a group for people whose unrequited love had ended in some kind of surrealist moment. There is a group for everything in California.

After several months of hard work on himself with the group, Stan was ready to open a shop and sell the thousands of yellow gumballs. He did this because he believed in capitalism, he loved capitalism. He loved the dynamic surge and crash of Amazon's stock price, he loved the great concrete malls spreading across America like blood staining through a handkerchief, he loved how everything could be tracked and mirrored in numbers. When he closed the store each night he would count the gumballs sold, and he would determine his gross revenue, his operating

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expenses, his operating margin; he would adjust his balance sheet and learn his debt to equity ratio; and after this exercise each night, Stan felt he understood himself and was at peace, and he could go home to his apartment and drink tea and sleep, without shooting himself or thinking about Sheila.

On the night before the IPO of gumballs.com, Sheila came to Stan in a dream. She was standing in a kiddie pool; Stan and his brothers and sisters were running around splashing and screaming; she had managed to insert herself into a Super-8 home movie of Stan's family, shot in the late 70's. She looked terribly sad.

"Sheila, where are you?" Stan said. "Why did you leave me, why did you become gumballs?"

"The Ant King has me," Sheila said. "You must rescue me."

Stan woke up, he shaved, he put on his Armani suit and drove his Lexus to his appointment with his venture capitalists and investment bankers. But the dream would not leave him. "Ant King?" he asked himself. "What's this about a goddamn Ant King?"

On the highway, near the swamp, he pulled his Lexus over to the shoulder. The American highway is a self-contained system, Stan thought. Its rest stops have video games, bathrooms, restaurants, and gas stations. There's no reason ever to leave the interstate highway system, its deadness and perfection and freedom. When you do reach your exit, you always have a slight sense of loss, as when awakening from a dream.

Stan took off his shiny black shoes and argyle socks, cuffed his Armani suit pants above the knees, and waded through the squidgy mud and tall reeds of the swamp. He saw a heron rise, flutter, and soar into the midmorning sky. Ant King, Ant King, he thought.

Miles underground, the Ant King was watching an old episode of *Charlie's Angels* on cable.

"Which one do you identify with?" he asked Sheila. "The blonde one, or the pretty brunette one, or the perky, smart brunette one?"

"Stan may come rescue me, you know," Sheila said.

"I like how you never see Charlie. And how Boswell — is that his name, Boswell? — how he's kind of a foil and audience for the girls. There's

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all this unrealized desire — Boswell desires the girls, but he's got no chance, and I think they desire Charlie, but Charlie's invisible."

Sheila picked at a seam in the orange sofa. "It is *possible*. He *might* come rescue me."

The Ant King blinked and tried to smile reassuringly. "Sure. No, yeah, definitely. I think the two of you are just going through a phase, maybe. You know, it took him a while to deal with, ah, what he's going through."

Sheila glared at him. "You are so full of shit!" she said.

The Ant King threw his bag of Doritos at her. "Fine! I was just trying to be nice!" he shouted. "I'm full of shit? *I'm* full of shit? What about your dorky boyfriend?" He grabbed the remote and changed the channel, showing Stan, sitting in his Lexus with the door open, toweling off his muddy feet. "He's a lost cause, baby. You want me to respect a guy like that?"

"I hate it here," said Sheila.

The Ant King smoothed his antennae and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm sorry about throwing the Doritos. Maybe I overreacted. Okay?"

"I hate you, too," said Sheila.

"Fine," said the Ant King, savagely snatching up the remote control and turning back to *Charlie's Angels*. "Be that way."

"Gumballs are more than candy, isn't that right, Stan?" said Monique, smiling broadly.

Stan nodded. His feet were still wet, inside his argyle socks. "Yes, gumballs have a lot of, ah, a lot greater significance than just candy."

Monique paused and looked at Stan brightly, waiting for him to go on. Across the table, the three Credit Suisse First Boston underwriters, Emilio Toad, Harry Hornpecker, and Moby Pfister, sat stone-faced and unreacting in their gray double-breasted suits.

Stan tried to remember the gumballs.com business plan. "They have hard shells," he said. "People, ah, they want challenge...the hardness, the gumminess...."

Monique broke in smoothly. Monique, all seven post-gender-reassignment-surgery feet of her; Monique, always dressed to the nines and tens; Monique was a Valley legend for her instincts, her suavity, her

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rapacious, exemplary greed. Stan had sold Monique on the idea of gumballs.com, and she had invested — found him the right contacts, the right team — and here they were at the Big Day, the Exit Strategy.

"Stan!" she cried joyously, fixing him with a penetrating stare. "Don't be shy! Tell them about how gumballs are sex! Tell them about our top-gun semiotics professors, tell them about gumballs as a cultural trope! You see," she said, swooping onto Hornpecker, Pfister, & Toad, "you can't think of this as a candy thing, a food & bev thing, a consumer cyclic thing; no way, José! Think Pokemon. Think World Wide Wrestling. Think Star Wars!"

"Could we get back to the numbers," said Emilio Toad in a voice that sounded like a cat being liquefied in an industrial-strength mixer. The gray faces of Harry Hornpecker and Moby Pfister twitched in relief.

Later, after the deals were signed and the faxes were faxed, Monique and Stan took a taxi to a cigarillo bar to celebrate.

"What, like, is *up* with you today?" said Monique, crouched somewhat uncomfortably in the taxicab, her knees almost touching her chin, but exuding her usual sense of style and unflappability.

"Um...just IPO jitters?" said Stan hopefully.

"Cut the crap," said Monique.

"I had a dream about Sheila," Stan blurted out.

"Oh goddess," said Monique. "Not this again."

"It seemed so real," Stan said. "She said I had to rescue her from the Ant King."

"Well, you're not my only weirdo CEO," Monique said, giving him a manly, sidearm hug, "but I think you're the weirdest."

The next morning, nursing a cognac hangover and a throat raw from cigarillo smoke, Stan stood bewildered in front of a two-story building in downtown Palo Alto. It looked a lot like where he worked. There on the signboard were the other companies in his building: Leng Hong Trading; Trusty & Spark, patent attorneys; the Bagel Binge, marketing department; MicroChip Times, editorial. But no gumballs.com, Inc.

"I thought you might be here, sir," said Pringles, his secretary, appearing at his elbow.

"Huh? Pringles!" said Stan. The day before, Pringles had been dressed

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in a black T-shirt reading "Your Television Is Already Dead" and twelve earrings, but now she was in a smart ochre business suit, carried a mahogany-colored briefcase, and wore pearls.

"We've moved, sir," she said, leading the way to the limousine.

On the highway to Santa Clara, something occurred to Stan. "Pringles?" he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"You didn't use to call me sir — you used to call me Stan."

"Yes, sir, but we've gone public now. SEC regulations."

"You're kidding," said Stan.

Pringles stared out the window.

THE GUMBALLS.COM BUILDING was thirty stories of mirrored glass windows with its own exit off Highway 101. A forty-foot cutout of the corporate animated character, Mr. Gumball, towered over Stan, exuding yellow hysteria. Pringles escorted Stan to his office suite on the thirtieth, after giving him a building pass.

"Wow," said Stan, looking at Pringles across his enormous glass desktop. "Nice work, Pringles."

"Thank you, sir."

"So what's my schedule for today?"

"Nothing lined up, sir."

"Nothing?"

"No, sir."

"Oh. Could I look at the numbers?"

"I'll order them from Accounting, sir."

"Can't I just ask Bill?"

"Sir, Bill is the CFO of a public company now. He doesn't have time to look at the numbers."

"Oh. Shouldn't I have a staff meeting with the department heads or whatever?"

"Vic is doing that, sir."

"Vic? Who's Vic?"

"Vic is our Executive Vice President for Operations, sir."

"He is?"

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"Yes, sir."

Stan looked at his desk. There were gold pens, a golden tape dispenser, a framed picture of Sheila, and a glass jar full of yellow gumballs. They were the last of the Sheila gumballs.

"Pringles?" Stan said.

"Yes, sir?"

"I don't have a computer."

"That's right, sir."

There was a pause.

"Anything else, sir?"

"Um, yeah. Pringles, what do you suggest I do today?"

Pringles turned and walked across the expanse of marble floor to a teak closet with a brass doorknob. She opened it and returned with a leather golfing bag, which she leaned against the glass desk.

"Pringles, I don't golf," said Stan.

"You need to learn, sir," said Pringles, and left.

Stan took a gumball from the glass jar and looked at it. He thought about biting into it, chewing it, blowing a bubble. Or at least sucking on it. I really should try one of these sometime, he thought. He looked at Sheila's picture. He put the gumball in the pocket of his Armani suit jacket.

Then he went to look for Vampire.

"Hi," said Stan, looking around a corner of a cubicle on the seventeenth floor. "I'm Stan."

"Yeah, whatever," said the occupant of the cubicle, not looking away from her monitor.

"No, really, I'm Stan, I'm the CEO here."

"Yeah, I believe you, so? What do you want, a medal?"

"Well, uh," Stan said. "So what are you up to?"

"I'm storyboarding the Mr. Gumball Saturday morning cartoon pilot, and I'm past deadline, and I'm paid shit, Mr. CEO."

"Oh, okay," said Stan. "I won't bug you then."

"Great," said the cartoon storyboardist.

"Hey, by the way, you don't know where the sysadmins and stuff are though, do you?" Stan asked.

"I thought you weren't going to bug me, then."

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* * *

After many such adventures, Stan found himself in the third sub-basement of the gumballs.com building, close to despair. It was eight P.M., and his building pass expired at nine.

Suddenly, faintly, from far off, Stan heard the sound of horrible, ghostly shrieking and rhythmic pounding.

Thank God, Stan thought, heading toward the sound. And indeed, as he got closer he could tell he was listening to one of Vampire's thrash goth trance doom CDs.

Stan had feared that, like Pringles, Vampire might suddenly be wearing a suit, but as he emerged into Vampire's blacklit cavern, he saw that Vampire was wearing knee-length jet-black hair, a black trenchcoat, fingerless studded leather gloves, and giant surgical-steel ear, nose, lip, and tongue piercings, as always. Perhaps he was surrounded by an even larger array of keyboards, monitors, and machines than yesterday, but it was hard to tell.

"Vampire!" Stan shouted over the music. "Am I glad to see you!"

"Hey, man," said Vampire, lifting a hand in salutation but not looking away from his monitor.

"So, hey, what are you up to?" said Stan, looking for somewhere to sit down. He started to take a broken monitor off of a folding metal chair.

"DON'T TOUCH THAT!" Vampire shouted.

"Oops, oops, sorry," said Stan, backing off.

"No problem," said Vampire.

"So, ah, you were saying?" Stan said hopefully.

"Lotta new machines coming in," said Vampire. "What do you know about NetBSD 2.5 routing across multiple DNS servers?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Stan.

"Okay," said Vampire, and nodded.

Stan waited a little while, looking around. Finally he spoke again. "Ah, Vampire, ever heard of a, the, this is going to sound silly but, the Ant King?"

"Nope," said Vampire. "I knew an Ant-Agonist once, on the Inferno BBS."

"Oh," said Stan. "But, um, how would you go about finding out about the Ant King?"

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"What search engines have you tried?" asked Vampire.

"Well, none," said Stan.

"Well, try Google, they're good."

"Okay," said Stan. "Um, Vampire?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't have a computer anymore."

Vampire turned and looked at Stan. "You poor bastard!" he said, and pointed. "Use that one."

The Ant King was sound asleep on the sofa, cans of Dr Pepper littered around him. Sheila got up gingerly, took off her sneakers, and held them in one hand as she crept for the door, clutching a Dorito in the other.

It was a lucky moment. Sheila passed several of the Ant King's henchmen (who were all bald and stout and wore identical purple fedoras) asleep at their desks, and threaded her way through the dark rooms of the Ant King's lair to the tunnels at the edge of it. She stopped at the mouth of the biggest tunnel. Far off, she could hear running water.

Something moved in the darkness beyond, a great hulking shape. Sheila moved cautiously forward. With a horrible dry clicking and rustling, the gigantic Black Roach of Death scuttled forward.

With trembling hands, Sheila fed it the Dorito, as she had seen the Ant King do, and reached up to pat its enormous antennae. Then she slid past it into the passageway.

She walked forward, into the darkness. Ten steps; twenty. Nervously she chewed, and blew a bubble. The bubble popped, echoing loudly in the tunnel. Sheila froze. But there was no movement from behind. Carefully she spat the wad of gum into her hand and pressed it into the wall. Then she moved forward. Thirty steps. I can do this, she thought. Forty.

Suddenly Sheila was terribly hungry.

I'll eat when I get out, she thought grimly.

But that didn't seem quite right.

She searched her pockets and found another Dorito. She lifted it to her lips and stopped. No. No, not that. Something was troubling her. She let the Dorito fall to the ground.

I didn't prepare properly for this, she thought. This isn't the way you escape. You need a plan, you need resources. Anyway, there's no rush.

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She began creeping back down the tunnel.

It's not so bad here anyway, she thought. I'm all right for now. I'll escape later. This was just a test run. She stroked the antennae of the Black Roach of Death idly as she passed.

Damn Stan anyway, she thought as she crept back through the dark rooms. Am I supposed to do this all by myself? That guy! Big talker, but no action.

On the TV, some CNN talking head was upset about market valuations. "Ten billion for *gumballs*? This is the perfect example of market froth! I mean there's no business model, there are no barriers to entry; only in today's...."

Sheila switched to MTV and sank into the couch next to the Ant King.

"Hi," said the Ant King drowsily.

"Hi," said Sheila.

"Hey, I missed you," said the Ant King.

"Stick it in your ear," said Sheila.

"Listen, your ambivalence about me is really getting old, Sheila," said the Ant King.

"Ambivalence about you? Dream on," said Sheila. She took a yellow gumball from the dish on the coffee table, popped it in her mouth, and bit down. A crunch, a rush of sweetness, the feeling of her teeth sinking into the gumball's tough flesh. Sheila smiled and blew a bubble. It popped. She wasn't hungry anymore. "I hate your guts," she said.

"Yeah, whatever," said the Ant King, rolling over and pulling a pillow over his head. "Grow up, Sheila."

THE SEARCH ON Google.com had returned several bands and music CDs, an episode of the King of the Hill cartoon, the "Lair of the Ant King" slide at the local waterpark, and several video games in which the Ant King was one of the villains to beat. Stan listened to the CDs in his car, watched the cartoon in a conference room with a video projector, and installed the video games on a receptionist's computer on the fifth floor and played them at night, hiding from the security guards. He popped down to visit Vampire a lot, and avoided Pringles and his office entirely.

"I'm on level five," he said, "and I just can't get past the Roach."

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"And you've still got the magic sword?" said Vampire, not looking up.

"No, I lost that to the Troll."

"You don't even have to go to the Troll," said Vampire, who never played video games but read the video game newsgroups religiously. "You can cross the Dread Bridge instead."

"I always die on the Dread Bridge when it breaks in two."

"You're not running fast enough," said Vampire. "You've got to run as fast as you can, and jump at the last moment."

"It's tough," said Stan.

Vampire shrugged.

"How are things with you?" Stan asked.

"The patch for mod-ssl 1.2.4.2 is totally incompatible with the recommended build sequence for Apache on Solaris. Solaris is such crap."

"Oh," said Stan. "Okay."

"Hey, I got you something," Vampire said.

"What?" said Stan.

"That," said Vampire, pointing.

On top of a rack of dusty computers Stan saw a four-foot-long sword in a gilded leather sheath. Its ivory handle depicted a spiral of crawling ants. Stan pulled the sword a little out of its sheath, and an eerie blue light filled the room.

"Cool, huh?" said Vampire. "I got it on eBay."

Holding his magic sword, Stan left the elevator on the thirtieth floor and cautiously approached his office. He hadn't been there in a week; he felt like he should check in.

Pringles met him at the door. "This isn't your office anymore, sir," she said.

"It's not?" Stan said. He tried to hold the sword at an inconspicuous angle. Pringles ignored it.

"No, sir. We moved Vic in there."

"Oh, really? Say, when do I get to meet Vic, anyway?"

"I'm not sure, sir. He's quite busy these days, with our acquisition of Suriname."

"We're acquiring Suriname? Isn't that a country?"

"Yes, sir. Follow me, please."

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"Um, Pringles," said Stan, hurrying to catch up. "Am I, ah, still CEO?"

Pringles opened the door of his new office. It was a lot smaller.

"I'll check with HR, sir," she said, and left.

That afternoon, as Stan sat at his new, smaller desk, Monique stopped by.

"Hey hey," she said, "so here's where they've got you, huh?"

"Monique, what's going on? Have I been, um, usurped?" It seemed like the wrong word.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about it, tiger," she said, sinking into a leather visitor's chair, and crossing her legs. "Gumballs is doing great. Vic's doing a good job, you should be proud."

"But Monique — I don't *do* anything anymore."

"Oh, stop whining," Monique said. She rolled her eyes. "God, you make such a big deal out of everything. Cool sword."

"Thanks," said Stan glumly.

"Look, you're a startup-stage guy, not an operations-stage guy. Just enjoy the ride."

"I guess," said Stan.

"There you go. Listen, you clearly need cheering up. I'm babysitting my sister's kid on the weekend, we're going to the water park. You wanna come?"

"Sure," said Stan. "Why not?"

Monique came by Stan's apartment Saturday morning, and Stan came outside, dressed in a blue Oxford and chinos and carrying a bathing suit and towel, and his magic sword. Monique was wearing a silver blouse, a blue miniskirt, a silk scarf and sunglasses. Her sister's kid had a shaved head, powdered white skin, black lipstick and kohl, and was wearing combat boots and a wedding dress adorned with black spiders.

"Stan, this is Corpse, my sister's kid," Monique said.

"Hi," said Stan.

Corpse snarled, like a wolf.

"Great, everybody ready?" said Monique.

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In the car, Stan said, "So, Corpse, what's your favorite subject in school?"

"Shop," said Corpse.

"Aha," said Stan. "And what do you want to do when you grow up?"

"Bring about the violent overthrow of the current political order," said Corpse.

"Really? How come?" asked Stan.

Corpse's eyes rolled back into their sockets, exposing the white.

"Takes after me, don't you, Corpse?" said Monique happily. Corpse said nothing.

"But Monique," said Stan. "You're a venture capitalist. You *are* the current political order."

Monique laughed.

"Corpse," said Stan. "I hope you don't mind me asking this, but ah, are you a boy or a girl?"

"You teleological totalitarian!" Corpse shouted. "Your kind will be first up against the wall when the revolution comes!"

"Now, Corpse, be nice," said Monique. But she was grinning.

STAN STOOD in line for the water slide, in his bathing suit, behind Corpse, who was still wearing the wedding dress. He had left his sword in the locker room. He felt naked without it.

Corpse sat in the mouth of the water slide tunnel, waiting for the "Go" light to turn green. Stan looked over at the slide to his left. It was a boat ride; in a puffy inflatable boat, four stout, bald men in business suits and purple fedoras sat waiting for the green light. Behind them was a Mexican family in bathing suits, waiting with their boat.

That's funny, Stan thought. He looked closer at the fedora'd men.

In their boat was a glass jar filled with perhaps three hundred yellow gumballs.

The lights turned green; Corpse vanished into the slide and the men in the boat slid into their tunnel. Despite the sign reading ONE AT A TIME, WAIT FOR THE GREEN LIGHT, Stan jumped in after Corpse.

Halfway through the twists, turns, splashing chaos of the tunnel, Stan collided with Corpse. "Hey!" Corpse yelled, and was sucked away again.

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Stan was dumped out into a great basin. He went under and came up spluttering, chlorine stinging his nose. Standing unsteadily, he looked over at the end of the boat ride. There was no sign of the men with the fedoras: the water there flowed peacefully.

"Hey!" said Corpse, splashing him. "You're not supposed to go two at once!"

"I thought you wanted to overthrow the current political order," said Stan, still watching the boat ride.

"Oh, right, so let's start with the water park," Corpse said.

"Why not?" said Stan. The Mexican family, in their boat, emerged from the boat ride. There was no question: the other boat had vanished while in the tunnel.

Monique was standing next to the basin in her polka-dot bikini, yelling into her pink waterproof cell phone. "No, you idiot, I don't *want* you profitable! Because we can't find backers for a profitable company, that's why! Well *find* something to spend it on!" She clicked off the cell phone and shook her head. "Some people are so stuck in the Old Economy."

"Can I borrow that?" Stan asked.

"Okay," Monique said, handing him the phone. "Don't lose it."

"Meet me at the boat ride in five minutes," Stan said, and dialing Vampire, hurried off to get his sword.

The light turned green, and the boat containing Monique, Corpse, and Stan, holding his magic sword, slid into the tunnel.

"Did you get in?" shouted Stan into the pink cell phone over the roar of rushing water. The boat surged through the great pipe, spun into a whirlpool, then rushed on.

"Yeah," said Vampire, over the cell phone. "It wasn't easy, but I'm in. Actually, after I cracked the session key it wasn't that bad, they've got a continuous telnet session going over a Pac Bell router, so...."

The boat lurched and heaved to the right and a cascade of water flew over them. Stan shouted, "So, did you, you know, open the secret door or whatever?"

"Oh, right," said Vampire, and typed a command to the water park's main computer, setting the "Lair of the Ant King" ride into "real" mode.

The rubber boat rushed into a curve. In front of them, a section of wall

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swung away and the boat flew out of the pipe, into darkness and space, falling between black canyon walls.

"This ride is cool!" said Corpse, as they fell.

When the boat hit the great subterranean river below, it bucked, and Monique and Corpse grabbed onto the handles set into its sides. Stan thought about whether to drop the pink cell phone or the magic sword, and while he thought about it, he flew out of the boat and disappeared into the icy rapids.

"Stan!" Monique yelled.

"Bummer," said Corpse.

The surging river slowed as it widened, they glided past massive black cliffs, and at last the rubber boat coasted up to a dock, where several stout men in purple fedoras helped Monique and Corpse onto dry land.

The Ant King bowed, and his antennae bobbed. "Well, this is an unexpected pleasure," he said.

"Cool lair," said Corpse.

"Why, thank you," said the Ant King. "You both look soaked. We have robes and changing rooms right over here. Care for an espresso?"

"Sure," said Monique.

"Got hot chocolate?" said Corpse.

"Why, yes, we do," said the Ant King.

"Okay, there's a little yellow bird here," Stan said.

"You still got the rod?" said Vampire over the pink cell phone.

Stan looked down at the crook of his arm, where he was uncomfortably carrying a rod, an axe, a loaf of bread, and a key. He was still in his bathing suit, dripping wet, and exhausted from wandering the tunnels for hours. The blue glow of his magic sword dimly illuminated the room, including a small yellow bird, which watched him suspiciously.

"Put the rod down," said Vampire. Stan let it slide out from the crook of his arm and clatter to the ground.

"Now catch the bird," Vampire said.

With the pink cell phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder, and his collection of found objects in the crook of his sword arm, Stan edged toward the bird. It looked at him dubiously, and hopped away.

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"I can't seem to get ahold of it," Stan said.

"All right, forget the bird. It's only extra points anyway."

"Extra points!" shouted Stan. "I'm not trying to get extra points, I'm trying to get Sheila!"

"Okay, okay, keep your hat on," said Vampire. "Get the rod again and go north."

While Stan wandered a maze of twisty little passages, leaving found objects and pieces of bread according to Vampire's instructions, in order to differentiate the rooms from one another and thus navigate the maze, and Corpse and Monique changed into fuzzy purple terrycloth bathrobes, and Sheila watched the Comedy Channel and felt inexplicably restless, the Ant King logged onto a network and sent a message, which appeared in the corner of Vampire's screen.

Think you're pretty smart, huh? it said.

"Okay," said Stan, "uh, I'm in the room with the axe again."

"Hold on," said Vampire. "Message." He did some tracking to find out where the message came from, but no luck: he found a circular trail of impossible addresses.

I know I'm pretty smart, he typed back at it.

Not as smart as you think, the Ant King typed back at him. *You think I would leave sendmail running on an open port on my* real *proxy server? As if I didn't know about the security hole in that baby.*

"Okay, I think I see the way out here," said Stan. "This is the room with the two pieces of bread — have I gone east from here?"

"Hold on a sec," muttered Vampire.

"I don't think I have," said Stan.

Okay, I'm stumped, typed Vampire. *If that's not your real proxy server, what is it*?

It's my Palm Pilot, the Ant King typed back. *With a few tweaks to the OS. And you're hogging a lot of memory on it, so I'd appreciate it if you logged off, Vampy.*

Hey, hold on, Vampire typed. *Is this Ant-Agonist*?

Used to be. Not anymore, typed the Ant King.

"Hey, I'm out!" Stan said. "It's opening up into a large cavern. Wow, this is great, Vampire!"

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No shit! typed Vampire. *How have you been, man*?

I've been great, but I can't say the same for you, typed the Ant King. *You are rusty as hell. What are you doing selling gumballs for a living anyway*?

"Oh, shit," said Stan. "Oh, shit!"

"What?" said Vampire curtly, typing furiously in the chat window.

"Vampire, it's the bridge. It's the Dread Bridge! I always die at the Dread Bridge."

"I told you, man," Vampire said, absently, as he chatted with the Ant King. "You've just gotta run fast enough."

CELL PHONE IN one hand, sword in the other, Stan began to run. His bare feet slapped against the planks of the Dread Bridge; the bridge swung crazily over the chasm, and he fought for balance. As he neared the middle he threw the sword ahead of him, and it clattered onto the ground beyond the bridge. He stuffed the cell phone into the waistband of his bathing suit, and ran on. Suddenly he heard a snap behind him, and he jumped. The bridge broke beneath his weight, and swung away. Stan flew through the air, but not nearly far enough; he fell, and barely managed to grab the planks of the bridge beneath him. He hung on as the ropes strained; he thought they were going to break, and he screamed in terror. But the ropes held. Stan swung over the dark canyon, clutching the planks.

"Hey, are you okay?" Vampire said.

"Yeah," Stan panted. "Yeah, I think so."

"Great," Vampire said. "Listen, I know this is kind of a bad time, but there's something we need to talk about."

"Huh?" said Stan. "What?"

"Well, this is kind of awkward for me, but, you know, I haven't really been feeling fulfilled professionally here lately...."

"What?" said Stan.

"So, well, I've decided to accept another offer of employment, basically."

"You're kidding," said Stan. "From whom?"

"From the Ant King, actually. I'm pretty excited about it, it's a whole different level of responsibility, and — "

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"The Ant King?!" yelled Stan. "The Ant King?!"

"Yeah, actually it turns out I know him from way back and — "

"But Vampire!" yelled Stan. "Listen, aren't we in this together?"

"Hey, Stan," Vampire said. "Let's not make this hard on ourselves, okay? This is just the career move I think is right for me right now...."

"Vampire, we can give you more responsibility!" Stan could feel the cool air of the endless chasm blowing against his feet. "More stock! Whatever you want!"

"That's great of you to offer, Stan, really," said Vampire. "But, you know, it's getting really corporate here, and that's just not my scene. I think I'll be happier in a more entrepreneurial climate."

"But Vampire!" Stan shouted, and just then the ropes above him groaned and one snapped, and the planks he was holding onto twisted and spun. Stan was slammed against the wall, and the pink cell phone popped out of his waistband and fell into the darkness. He waited, but he never heard it reach the ground.

Crap, he thought, and began to climb the planks toward the ledge above.

"Yes!" said the Ant King. "Exactly! Wile E. Coyote is the only figure of any integrity in twentieth-century literature."

"Totally," said Corpse.

"Come on," said Monique. "What about Bugs Bunny?"

"An amateur!" said the Ant King. "A dilettante! No purity of intention!"

"Pinky and the Brain?"

"Losers! Try to take over the world, indeed!"

Sheila cleared her throat. "Um, does anyone want some more pretzels?" she asked.

"Are you the one we're here to rescue?" Corpse asked. Sheila blanched.

"Yeah, she's the one," said the Ant King. "So listen — *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*?"

"Oh, please," said Corpse. "*Babylon 5*!"

"Excellent choice!" said the Ant King.

"I like *Star Wars*. Particularly Darth Vader," said Monique.

"I'll just go for some more pretzels, then," Sheila said.

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"But then he bails on the Dark Side in the end!" the Ant King said. "See? No integrity!"

Cold and angry, clutching his magic sword in both hands, Stan stood before the gigantic Black Roach of Death.

"Come on, big boy," he yelled. "Make my day! Meet my sword, Roach Motel! You're gonna check in, but you're not gonna check — "

With a lazy swipe of its great claws, the Roach batted the magic sword out of Stan's hands. It flew away and clattered into the darkness. Then the Roach grabbed Stan around the throat and lifted him high into the air.

"Eek!" Stan screamed in terror.

"He's a friend of mine," yelled Sheila, sprinting out of the darkness.

"Sheila!" choked Stan.

"Here, c'mon boy, put him down, here's a Dorito," Sheila said.

Reluctantly the Roach dropped Stan, ate a Dorito, allowed itself to be petted, and crawled back into the tunnel.

"Thanks," croaked Stan, as Sheila helped him up.

Hand in hand, Sheila and Stan made their way through the tunnels leading away from the Ant King's lair.

"Don't look back," Stan kept saying. "Okay? Don't look back."

"Okay already," Sheila said.

Suddenly Sheila stopped.

"What?" said Stan, careful not to look back at her.

"I'm, um, I'm hungry," said Sheila.

"Me too," said Stan. "Let's go."

"But listen, we could just sneak back and grab a bite to eat, right? I mean, I ran out here because I heard you were finally coming, but I would've packed a sandwich if I'd — "

"Sheila, are you nuts?" said Stan.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Sheila.

Stan felt in his pockets. The left one was empty. The right one had something in it — a gumball. Dry. He pulled it out and squinted at it in the dimness. He remembered putting a gumball into the pocket of his suit jacket, but....

"Okay, so I'm going back," Sheila said.

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"Quick, chew this," Stan said, handing the gumball back to her without looking back.

She chewed the gumball, and they walked onward through the tunnel.

"I never thought I'd say this," said the Ant King, stirring his espresso nervously. "Sheila will be angry, but — well, how can I put this — "

"Spit it out already," Monique said.

"Yeah," Corpse said.

"Corpse, I just — I feel like you really get me, you know?"

"Yeah," Corpse said softly. "I feel the same way."

Monique whistled.

"Would you..." the Ant King blushed. "Would you like to stay underground with me forever and help me rule the subterranean depths?"

"Wow, that would be totally awesome!" Corpse said.

"Oh god, your mother's going to kill me," Monique said.

"Oh come on, Aunt Monique, don't turn into a hypocrite on me! You always told me to follow my heart! You always say it's better to get into trouble than be bored!"

"I didn't say you can't do it," said Monique. "I just said your mother's going to kill me."

"So does that mean I can?" asked Corpse.

"How about if we do this on a trial basis at first," Monique said. "Okay? And you — " she pointed a menacing finger at the Ant King. "No addictive gumball crap, okay?" His antennae stiffened in surprise. "Yeah, Aunt Monique knows more than you think. You watch your step, buddy." She turned to Corpse. "You have one month," she said. "I'll talk to your mom. Then you come back up and we talk it over."

"Oh gosh, thank you, Aunt Monique!"

"You have my word," said the Ant King. "Corpse will enjoy life here thoroughly. And it will be very educational."

"I bet," said Monique.

"Hey, can we violently overthrow the current political order?" Corpse asked.

"Sure," said the Ant King. "That sounds like fun."

* * *

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EPILOGUE

Stan sat across the desk from Lucy the HR person, who smiled at him brightly. "So what are your skills?" she asked.

"I founded this company," he said.

"We try to be forward-looking here," she said. "Less progressive organizations are focused on past accomplishments, but our philosophy is to focus on current skills. What languages can you program in?"

"None," said Stan. "I can use Microsoft Word, though."

"Mmm-*hmm*," Lucy said. "Anything else?"

"I'm pretty good at financial analysis," Stan said.

"We are actually overstaffed in Accounting," Lucy said.

"I could work in Marketing," Stan said.

Lucy smiled indulgently. "Everyone thinks they know how to do Marketing. What about Customer Service?"

"I think I'll pass," said Stan.

"Okay," Lucy said brightly. "Well, I'll let you know as soon as something else opens up. Gumballs.com cares about you as an employee. We want you to know that, and we want you to enjoy your indefinite unpaid leave. Can you do that for me, Stan?"

"I'll try," said Stan, and he left.

Stan finally met Vic at the company Christmas party in San Francisco. As he expected, Vic was tall, blond, and athletic, with a tennis smile.

"Stan!" Vic said brightly. "Good to finally meet you. And this must be Sheila."

"Hi!" said Sheila, shaking hands.

"Hi, Vic," said Stan. "Listen, I...."

"*Great* dress," Vic said to Sheila.

"Thanks!" Sheila said. "So what's running the show like?"

Stan said, "I wanted to...."

"It's actually quieted down a bunch," Vic said. "I'm starting to have time for a little golf and skiing."

Stan said, "I was wondering if we could...."

"Wow!" said Sheila. "Where do you ski?"

"Tahoe," said Vic.

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"Of course," laughed Sheila.

Stan said, "Maybe if we could take a few minutes...."

"So is your wife here?" Sheila asked.

Vic laughed. "No, I'm afraid I'm single."

"Wow, are you gay?" Sheila asked.

"About 80-20 straight," Vic said.

"Hey, me too!" Sheila said.

Stan said, "It's about my job here at...."

"But really, I just haven't found anyone I've clicked with since moving to the Bay Area," Vic said.

"I know what you mean!" Sheila said.

Stan said, "Because I have some ideas about how I could...."

"So where were you before the Bay Area?" Sheila asked.

Later Sheila came up to Stan at the punch bowl.

"Stan, you know, things haven't been going so great for us lately."

"Uh huh," Stan said.

"I want you to know, I really appreciate you rescuing me...."

"Hey, no problem," Stan said.

"But since then, it just seems like we aren't going anywhere, you know?"

"Sheila, I love you," said Stan. "I'd give my life for you. I've never found anything in my life that means anything to me, except you."

"I know, Stan," she said. "I know. And maybe I'm being a bitch, but you know, that's kind of hard to live up to. You know? And I'm just not there yet." She put her arms around him. He stiffened. She let go and sighed. "I just think...."

"Are you going to run off with Vic?" Stan said. "Just give it to me straight."

Sheila sighed. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I guess I am. I'm sorry."

"Me too," Stan said.

Stan left the party and walked to the Bay Bridge. He looked down into the black water. He thought about jumping, but he didn't really feel like dying. He just didn't feel like being him anymore.

He decided to become a bum and walked to South of Market, where

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he traded his suit, shoes, and wallet for an army jacket, a woolen cap, torn jeans, sneakers, a shopping cart, three plastic sacks, and a bottle of Night Train in a paper bag. But he wasn't a good bum. He was too polite to panhandle, he didn't like the taste of Night Train, and at campfires he felt alienated from the other bums — he didn't know any of the songs they liked, and they didn't want to talk about Internet stocks. He was hungry, cold, lonely, tired, and sober when Monique found him.

"You look like shit," she said.

"Go away, Monique," he said. "I'm a bum now."

"Oh, yeah?" said Monique. "And how's that working out?"

"Lousy," Stan admitted.

Monique got out of her BMW and squatted down next to where Stan lay. The other bums moved away, rolling their eyes and shaking their heads in disgust.

"I've lost everything I love," Stan said.

"Aren't you the guy who loved the dramatic surge and crash of Amazon's stock ticker? The concrete malls spreading across America like blood staining a handkerchief? How everything can be tracked and mirrored in numbers — numbers, the lifeblood of capitalism?"

"Well, yeah," Stan said.

"Get in the car," Monique said. "You're hired."

Stan got in the car.

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LUCIUS SHEPARD

MORE BITING COMMENTARY

EVER THINK how it would be if things sounded in life as they do in the movies?

A dog barking would sound like Godzilla with a toothache. Handguns would use amplifiers, not silencers, and folks like Britney Spears and 'N Sync would have to be summarily executed.

But not even Dolby Digital Reality could prepare you for the sonic excesses of *Dracula 2000.*

When this Dracula hisses, it's like somebody released the air brake on an eighteen-wheeler. When he farts it's like a rip in the space-time continuum (though breaking wind would have been fitting in context, the count doesn't actually do so in the film. I'm extrapolating here.) If magnificently inappropriate noise were a criteria of filmic excellence, *Dracula 2000* would be the greatest vampire movie of all time, and not a bad video game with a soundtrack for a plot, a babe-rich environment designed for eleven-year-olds whose notion of female perfection is the thought of Jeri Ryan dressed in Underalls.

Hmm....

Of course you know going in that any movie with a date attached to the title is going to be product. We're probably going to see lots more of this. Like for instance:

HAMLET 2012
The Man In Black Is Back...
...this time he's strapped...

Loathesome as this may sound, it would nonetheless be preferable to Ethan Hawke's recent ninety-minute version of the play, a project that only serves to cement young Hawke's position as Hollywood's resident arts idiot.

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The reason for these digressions is that I have little to say about *Dracula 2000* apart from, "I went to see it and I am ashamed." But a few words about the story would, I suppose, not be out of place. Years ago the original vampire hunter Van Helsing (Christopher Plummer) bagged the evil count and for some dumbass reason locked him away in a vault that occupies the basement of a London book store now belonging to his great grand-something (also Christopher Plummer). Burglars come ("What you reckon's in that coffin, Alf?") and free the Bitemeister, who then goes off to search for Van Helsing's daughter....

Okay. That's enough.

You have to feel for Christopher Plummer. The guy must have serious tax problems.

Responsible for the direction is one Patrick Lussier, who — judging by his breast fixation and gaudy post-rock style — comes to us from the spawning ground of MTV, which previously has given us such *auteurs* as Tarsem Singh (*The Cell*), Antoine Fuqua (*The Replacement Killers*), and Michael Bay (*Con Air, The Rock,* and *Pearl Harbor*).

A list to conjure with.

I was once accosted in a bar by a drunken pre-med student who proceeded to tell me the truth about vampires. He'd figured it all out. I don't recall a great deal of what he said — I'm not terribly interested in the metabolisms of fictional creatures (Personal note to my stalker: Stay calm. I believe in *your* vampire). But I do remember him saying that given the fact vampires spend half their time in a vegetative state, half in an accelerated condition that affords them inhuman strength and inspires the fiercest of appetites, their digestive processes would likely be a gross parody of the human, producing incredibly vile liquified wastes and ghastly breath. He went on to extend this chain of logic *ad nauseum*, but I had already gotten his point: the undead are a skanky bunch. The original cinematic vampire, Nosferatu, conformed to the pre-med student's model, but Bela Lugosi's poetic Valentino-esque take on Count Dracula — elegant pomaded blood junkie in white tie and tails — was a complete departure. These seminal images have developed over the years into two sharply divergent filmic strains, the latter incarnated by Anne Rice's tortured decadents, the former by the seedy Darwinism of Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark*, with its lowlife vampire "family" living like murderous cockroaches in the contemporary Southwest.

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Like most things — like the economy, our chances for survival as a species, and Madonna's bustline — Hollywood vampire flicks have suffered a decline. In recent years, only *Blade* with its comic-book smarts and high-octane pacing made a respectable entry. One would have to look back to the aforementioned *Near Dark* to find a classic of the genre; and before that we would have to return to the '70s and George Romero's horrifyingly mundane *Martin*, which treats of a teenage vampire without fangs forced to chloroform and then cut open his victims. Francis Ford Coppola's attempt to revive the gothic form, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, would have benefited had Mr. Coppola understood that at least half of the nineteenth century did not look as if it were set dressed by Rembrandt, and that a gothic atmosphere is best achieved by understated dramatics and a subdued, even crepuscular palette. John Carpenter's *Vampires*... Faugh! A total waste of Thomas Ian Griffith. *Interview with the Vampire*? Two words — Tom Cruise. Then we have the also-rans: *Innocent Blood* with Anne Parillaud; *A Vampire in Brooklyn* with Eddie Murphy; *Modern Vampires* (Casper Van Dien on a blood rampage); *Children of the Night*, in which redneck vampire Karen Black in all her voluptuous decay is kept chained in the attic by her husband and whines, "Gettin' little tired of eating leeches!" I'm certain I'm overlooking loads of gory trash, but who cares. The Future? More of the same. Though I must admit to having some nostalgia-driven interest in *The Omega Man* remake (despite Arnold's Schwarzenpresence), and I'm intrigued by the forthcoming *Teething*, which supposes a vampire baby born to normal parents.

At least day care will be no problem.

Last year while I was taking part in a discussion about *Blair Witch 2* on a Web chat (I had an hour free, okay?), "Shadow of the Vampire" was mentioned as a film some hoped might bring new vitality to the genre, and I looked forward to seeing it. I eventually watched the movie in the company of a friend, and afterward she turned to me and said, "Boring shitty pretentious." Well, I simply could not agree. To be considered truly pretentious, a film director must overindulge his vision and sense of style; since *Shadow's* director E. Elias Merhige is sadly lacking these qualities, I think it more accurate to say that his film aspires to pretension.

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"Boring" and "shitty," I'm all right with.

I note that *Shadow* was awarded the Bronze Horse at the Stockholm Film Festival, which is impressive on the face of it; but I have sufficient respect for audiences in Sweden to make me wonder if this may not be some sort of booby prize.

Technically, the film is a mess. The cutting verges on the professional, some of the worst I've seen, and the cinematography...it's as if Merhige tried in the main to limit himself to techniques available in the 1920s. If that's the case, then maybe I'm wrong about the pretension thing (I believe an analysis of the film would reveal this is not the case, yet the camera work has such a static character, the result is the same as if it were). It's hard to recall a movie with this much art house juice that was so ineptly crafted. It's equally hard to recall a script with so much wasted dramatic potential. The focus of all this incompetence is the shooting of F. W. Murnau's silent classic *Nosferatu*, and that choice of focus was a serious mistake. *Gods and Monsters* worked because the emphasis was not on *Frankenstein* but on the man who directed the film. Moviemaking involves a good bit of tedium, and instead of ranging peaks and valleys of tension and release, Merhige's story *kerflop kerflops* along just like the film in Murnau's rickety camera. The best thing about *Shadow* is its premise that Max Schreck, the lead in *Nosferatu*, was an actual vampire. Great start. But Merhige does nothing with it. His approach to narration is that of a man who tells a successful joke at a party and then spends the next ninety minutes explaining why it was funny. Characters are stated, not developed. Most of the cast are there to carry spears or be eaten. Of Murnau (John Malkovich) we know only that he is arrogant, a sexual omnivore, and shoots dope. Of Schreck (Willem Dafoe) we know even less — he's a vampire who has a prior relationship with Murnau. Schreck should have been the focus of the film, its real subject. When he peers intently at the grainy black and white raw footage of a sunrise, we want to understand everything he is feeling; but Merhige's interests apparently lay elsewhere, and Schreck remains for the most part unexploited, unexplored, and unexplained. There is an attempt at a plot involving a deal struck between Murnau and Schreck, the terms of which allow Schreck to eat Murnau's leading lady in exchange for his participation in the film, but

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this — along with Schreck's inability to keep his choppers off the crew — is downplayed to the extent that it seems almost extraneous. Most of the mayhem occurs off camera, a strategy both inoffensive and ineffectual.

Willem Dafoe is a terrific actor with excellent range, and I have no quarrel with him receiving awards; but if truth be told, this is not an awards caliber performance. He does an accent, he makes Mandarin gestures, he mugs. The make-up, which is outstanding, does the rest. Had Gilbert and Sullivan done a vampire operetta, Dafoe's Schreck would be right at home. As for Malkovich, one of the finest actors of his generation, this is not a shining moment. His accent wanders, and his devotion to the role seems shaky — which is understandable, since it appears to be designed solely as a commentary on the megalomania of all directors, another joke that grows tiresome. The upshot of this woeful mismatch of talent and material is that I had more fun hating *Dracula 2000* than I did staring dully as *Shadow of the Vampire* bellywhomped and went splat.

It's conceivable that another great vampire film may yet be made. I'd like to see one that eschewed the rococo and did without door closings that sound like guillotines and footsteps like the Tread o' Doom, and concentrated on the dark animal aspects of a solitary monster, showing us his biological requirements and some of the small moments of his life. A figure not altogether deromanticized. Defrocked of his cool cape or shades or whatever, but not — not entirely, at least — of his human sensibilities. A character who must change as he lives. Generally speaking, though, vampires may be a played-out proposition.

They've done a prolonged term as the romantic emblem of our fears concerning the afterlife, and the new millennium offers replacement terrors more relevant to the contemporary nightmare. However, vampires may retain value as satiric devices. A corporate vampire would be fun, humorous in its implicit redundancy. A vampire on Ecstasy would be a trip, and *Vampire on Ecstasy* isn't a bad title. Then there's my own vampire script, which has the working title, *Dark Pretender*. Or maybe *The Pretender* would be classier. (I know there was a TV show with a similar name, but that's so over!)

Here's how it goes.

A powerful vampire runs for President and wins by turning a

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plurality of voters. The nation thrives. Private negotiations with world leaders, they're a snap now. Just one little bite and those ol' trade agreements get signed *tout de suite*. Economy's rosy, world peace is starting to happen, and there's a bright golden haze on the meadow. So the Prez knocks off an intern now and again.... What the hey!

But-then-it's-discovered-the-Prez-is-really-evil-with-a-plan-to-pardon-the-hellspawn-and-release-them-from-exile.

And what if that plan succeeds?

Wellsir, along comes another vampire president out of the great Southwest, and he's got a new vision for America. Aided by his loyal minions in Florida, he'll take care of them hellspawns.

Imagine this digital poster. The White House superimposed over a bone-white full moon. Then the whole thing washes red.

Very sexy.

This puppy could get greenlighted. No lie. It's got enough sizzle to attract a major star, and is sufficiently generic to please the bean counters. And it's got an important message, too. One that speaks to the heart of all our problems, and makes plain the only thing we know for certain about real vampires:

They rule.

"It doesn't get any better than this."

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Most writers hate being asked where they got the inspiration for a particular story—as Daniel Keyes's article about "Algernon" in our May 2000 issue demonstrated, the sources are often numerous and scattered. But a lot of writers will profess that inspiration strikes them while they're performing repetitive physical activities—exercising, knitting, or gardening.

One can't help but wonder if Mr. Morressy found inspiration for this whimsical tale while doing the dishes...

Millmoth's Last Walk-in

By John Morressy

MS. AMES WAS THE IDEAL receptionist: beautiful in a cool, intimidating way, composed as a cat, organized as a space launch. She had witnessed every manifestation of marital difficulty from frosty silence to the throwing of furniture, and taken it in her stride. Dr. Millmoth had come to believe that she was unflappable. On this particular morning, having ushered out the Willises hand in hand, nuzzling one another like newlyweds, she reentered his office with her accustomed sang-froid.

"Yes, Ms. Ames?" said Millmoth.

"A dish. And a spoon."

"What about them?"

"They're in the waiting room."

"Don't tell me, tell maintenance."

"They insist on seeing the marriage counselor."

Millmoth's eyebrows rose. "Now, really, Ames...."

"I am absolutely serious," she went on, her voice steely. "A dish and a spoon are in the waiting room, and they are determined to see you."

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Millmoth removed his glasses and began to polish them. This was his preferred method of stalling for time while thinking of a response to a particularly mad question or comment by a client. Ames looked on, expressionless, her arms folded. In the fraught silence, the office door swung open. A dish and spoon entered and climbed into the chairs facing Millmoth. They both began speaking at once, loudly and angrily. Millmoth kept polishing his glasses for a full minute and then held up a hand for silence.

"What, precisely, do you want?" he asked.

"We want counseling. That's what you do, isn't it?" said the dish.

"Yes, it is, but I don't generally work with place settings."

"Why not, I'd like to know? Our marriage is in trouble and we want help. We're able to pay your fee, if that's what troubles you," the spoon said. She sounded like one accustomed to prompt and courteous service.

"What she means is that her old man is able to pay," the dish said.

She gave him a quick furious glance, then turned to Millmoth. In a well-bred contralto she said, "My parents are the Runcibles, of Sterling Place. If I had listened to them, I wouldn't be in this situation."

"Neither would I," the dish muttered.

Millmoth had heard all this before — though never from a spoon — and was reassured. They were a far cry from his usual clients, but a marriage was a marriage, clients were clients, and he was a trained professional. Look upon them as a challenge, he told himself.

He donned his glasses and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, making a little tent of his fingertips. He tapped his pursed lips with his index fingers, and then gave the visitors his most reassuring smile. "Why don't we begin by talking about the situation? Perhaps if you both state your feelings, we can find some common ground from which to work toward a solution."

They exchanged glances: hers dubious, his surly. The dish shrugged and said, "What can we lose? Go ahead, kid."

The spoon looked at Ames, then at Millmoth. He nodded to Ames, and she left the office. Clearing her throat, the spoon began, "We ran away together six years ago. We had no alternative. My parents were absolutely...." She hesitated, then burst into sobs.

Millmoth pushed a box of tissues in her direction. She plucked a handful and wiped her eyes.

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"It must have been a difficult decision," he said.

"One doesn't decide such things, Doctor Millmoth. One simply does them. One is swept away. You, of all people, should know that. We were mixed up with a wild crowd in those days...a cat who insisted that he was the reincarnation of Paganini, a dog who was subject to hysterical fits...."

"Don't forget the cow who thought she could jump over the moon," said the dish.

"That cow was your friend, not mine," the spoon snapped.

"Let's get back to your elopement," Millmoth said. "You must have been very much in love to run off against your parents' wishes."

"Oh, I was, I was!"

The dish said softly, "So was I, kid. There were two of us, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," she snapped. "And pretty soon there were three of us — you and I and that cake fork. Cheap little piece of stainless!"

"She didn't mean anything to me."

"And what about the butter knife? And the fish fork? And that horrid pink plastic iced-tea spoon?"

The dish raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right, kid, so I was a little wild in those days. I admit it, and I'm sorry. But that's all over. I haven't fooled around for years, honest."

"No? Then why are you so...so distant?"

The dish stared down at the floor. He began to pick nervously at a small chip on his rim. Very gently, Millmoth said, "It's important that you answer your wife's question."

Without looking up, the dish said, "Maybe if she took a little more pride in her appearance, instead of slouching around the apartment all tarnished — "

"*You* talk about appearance?" She turned to Millmoth, irate. "Look at him! Chips around his edge, and big greasy thumbprints all over him!"

"Polish yourself up before you start criticizing, kid." Now the dish turned to Millmoth. "When we were first going out together, she used to shine like a mirror. Now look at her."

The spoon was undeniably tarnished around the edge of her bowl and along her handle. "Yes. Yes. I admit it," she said. "I've let myself go. It's the strain of worrying about our marriage. And about *him*. I'm a fool, I know. He doesn't care anymore, but still...when I see those nicks and

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chips...and I think of him lying somewhere, cracked...." She sniffed and snatched another handful of tissues.

"I care, kid. You know I care," said the dish.

"You never say so. And you let yourself get so...so *greasy*."

"You don't know how it is, kid. It ain't easy, a dish like me, a classy silver spoon like you...."

"Don't talk that way about yourself. There's nothing wrong with you," said the spoon.

"Your old man thinks different. He treats me like a piece of hash house crockery half an inch thick. Your mother just looks at me and shudders. And maybe they're right. I *am* chipped around the edge. My relatives are a bunch of mugs."

"Chips don't mean anything. My uncle Spode was practically *scalloped,* and everyone treated him with respect. And even if you were cracked...." The spoon turned a sweet, affectionate look upon the dish.

He sniffed and muttered, "Pass me some of them tissues, will you?"

Millmoth looked on in quiet satisfaction as they sobbed, sniffled, and finally reached out to take one another by the hand. "Things don't seem to be quite so bad as you thought," he said.

"If only it could be like this all the time," the spoon said with a sigh.

"Perhaps you need only learn to communicate with each other," said Millmoth.

"I'm not so sure about that, Doc," said the dish. "It seems like whenever we try to talk, we get to criticizing each other, and next thing you know...." He gave a helpless shrug.

"I have a few suggestions. If you can spare me about ten minutes, we can do something right away." They looked up at him, eager and expectant. He buzzed the receptionist. "Ms. Ames, call maintenance. Tell them to bring dish detergent and silver polish to the office. And a linen dishtowel." Clicking off the intercom, he said, "You can pick them up on your way out. That will give you a fresh start. As for the future — have you ever considered a dishwasher?"

"Hey, great idea!" said the dish.

The spoon glanced demurely aside. "I don't wish to sound old fashioned, but I was brought up to be washed by hand. A dishwasher

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sounds so...so...." She made a little moue of distaste and concluded softly, "So *Hollywood.*"

Millmoth nodded and looked his most understanding. "I was thinking of a very small one, just for the two of you. If you're shy, there's always the separate compartment for silverware."

"Well...as long as we can be alone...."

"Why not, kid? Afterwards, I could give you a good polishing. Make you look like you just hopped out of the drawer. And you could give me a nice rubdown with a real linen dishtowel. What say we give it a try?"

She struggled with herself for a moment, then blurted, "Oh, let's do it! Right away!"

"We'll stop at Sears on the way home!"

They rose and flew into one another's arms with a passionate clink. As they left, the dish turned and said, "You were a great help, Millmoth. I really love this spoon."

"And I love my dish," said the spoon.

Beaming like a benevolent uncle, Millmoth said, "Well, in future don't be afraid to say so. Say it often. When you're tempted to criticize — into the dishwasher! And be sure to avoid harsh detergents and use only the very best polish and the softest towels on each other."

Alone in his office, Millmoth leaned back and swung his feet to the desk top. Well done, Millmoth, he told himself. He had certainly risen to the challenge. He clasped his hands behind his head and thought increasingly vainglorious thoughts. This would make him the talk of the profession.

His euphoria lasted for a delightful minute, then doubts began to seep in. A sudden thought gave him pause: You have just offered counseling to a dish and a spoon, Millmoth. This is a very uncommon occurrence. It would be advisable to check it out before mentioning it to colleagues. He swung his feet back down to the floor and buzzed the outer office.

"About that last couple, Ames. The ones who came in right after the Willises," he began.

"You mean the dish and the spoon."

So they were real. There was no deceiving Ms. Ames. They had somehow come out of a nursery rhyme and into my office. But how? And why me?

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"Did they tell you who referred them to me?"

"They didn't say."

"Thank you, Ames."

Walk-ins. That was unusual. Everything about this case was unusual.

Well, no. Not necessarily. They had probably heard him praised at some time or other by a successful client, and come on an impulse. They seemed an impulsive pair. The more he thought about it, the more reasonable that explanation seemed. His euphoria returned. I'm the best, and everyone knows it. Even spoons.

There was a paper in this one. Maybe a book. Oh, yes. A popular book. Best-seller. Need a good title. Something catchy. *The Tarnished Bride*? Sounds like a Von Stroheim movie. *From China With Love*? *The Chipped Husband*? This will require some thought.

He closed his eyes, picturing himself on talk shows, at autographing parties, a hot name on the lecture circuit, a chat room sensation. Popping out of a limo for the Oscar ceremonies. Why not? It was a natural for Disney.

And this might be just the beginning. He had opened a whole new field. Potential clients were legion. Nice straightforward cases, too. No more dealing with whackos who threatened to throw themselves, or each other, or him, out the window. Peace and quiet and fame and riches. Who cares if they're characters out of nursery rhymes? They've got rights, haven't they? This is America.

All the same, it was decidedly unusual. It might be wise to ask around, and see if any of his colleagues had had similar experiences. Yes, definitely. Honsecker was the one to ask. Sensible, down-to-earth. She knew everything that was going on in the profession. Millmoth reached for the telephone.

It took some time to get through to her, and when she spoke, it was in a guarded, hesitant voice. Not at all like Honsecker.

"Is everything all right?" Millmoth asked.

"Yes! Yes! Everything is perfectly normal. Nothing unusual going on here," she blurted.

This was definitely not the Honsecker he knew. Her manner was a giveaway. Something was up. He went directly to the point. "You've had some unusual clients recently, haven't you?"

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No answer came for a full two minutes. Millmoth could hear deep breathing. At last Honsecker said, "The Sprats."

"Jack and his wife?"

"Yes. They walked in this morning. She was three hundred and fifty pounds if she was an ounce, and he could have slid under a closed door."

"Has anyone else been seeing fictional characters?"

"Not that I know of. I don't like this, Millmoth. Not one bit. These people could present difficulties."

"The Sprats were no trouble, were they?"

"I'm not thinking of nursery rhyme people. I can deal with them. But now that there's a precedent, other fictional characters might seek us out. Jason and Medea, Helen and Menelaus, Claudius and Gertrude, the Macbeths...Dracula and all his brides...Bluebeard.... A different class of clientele altogether, Millmoth."

"Do you really think so?"

"Who knows? Anyone is liable to show up now. I'll get back to you later, Millmoth. I've got a two o'clock appointment. Real human beings."

Millmoth placed the telephone down gently and reflected on Honsecker's concerns. He had no desire to get mixed up in problems which involved blood and horror and various forms of nastiness. And no wealthy parents on Sterling Place. Tough to collect from vampires and murderers. Don't rush into anything you may regret, he told himself.

A crash from the outer office broke his concentration and brought him to his feet. He winced at a sound like someone gunning a Harley. A shrill scream cut through the roar, suddenly ear-piercing as the door of his office burst open.

In the doorway stood the worst-dressed client Millmoth had ever seen. Also the biggest. He was seven feet tall, minimum, and bursting the seams of his ill-fitting clothes. His pale greenish face looked like a patchwork quilt assembled in poor light, and he had bolts or plugs or something sticking out of his neck.

Keep calm, Millmoth told himself. Looks aren't everything. He removed his glasses, rose, and perched on the edge of the desk. He had found that this informal posture calmed excitable clients and stimulated trust. "If you wish to make an appointment, you'll have to — "

For a moment, the pose seemed to be having its desired effect. The

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intruder stood with his long arms dangling from the sleeves of a jacket at least four sizes too small. He looked at Millmoth with expressionless heavy lidded eyes and said in a deep slow monotone, "I can't stand it any longer. She screams. The moment she laid eyes on me she began screaming. She never stops screaming." His deep voice was unexpectedly refined.

"I see. Well, if you'll just take a seat," Millmoth said, smiling and gesturing toward the chair vacated by Mr. Dish. His visitor regarded him coldly. Without warning, he let out another of those Harley roars, tore the door off its hinges, and flung it into the corner. Then he lurched forward, arms outstretched, in a shambling rush for Millmoth.

Millmoth sideslipped and darted out the doorway. He heard his desk splinter, but did not look back. A tall woman with a doll-like face and crazy hairdo stood stiffly in the middle of the reception room, shrieking at regular intervals.

"They're together," Ames said.

Millmoth grabbed Ames's arm and dragged her out, heading for the staircase. This was no time to wait for an elevator. No telling what might pop out of it.

Six floors down, they paused for breath. "Dr. Millmoth...if I might make a suggestion...," Ames gasped.

Millmoth leaned against the wall, panting helplessly. He was badly out of shape. He urged her on with a gesture.

"I've noted down...a few things," she said. She drew out a small notebook and a pen. "First of all...we must relocate."

He nodded. She made a note and continued.

"And in future...accept new clients...by referral only. No walk-ins."

"Ms. Ames," he said. "You're absolutely right. You're incredible. Truly...unflappable." From above came a loud crash, snarls, shrieks, the sounds of rampage and destruction. Millmoth took a deep breath and seized Ames's hand. "I'm not. Let's get out of here!"

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Between jaunts to Rome and parts unknown, Mr. Bell reports from his Salt Lake City home that seventeen of his stories have just been published in an eBook with the title of How We Play the Game in Salt Lake, and Other Stories. *Said volume will include a couple of his previous contributions to our pages, such as "With Rain, and a Dog Barking" and "Bright New Skies."*

His latest story is a tale of timeless desires and future politics. Would a reader from 1980 find this story comprehensible? Let's hope that a reader from 2040 will find this story impossible.

Miss America at the Java Kayenko

By M. Shayne Bell

I LANDED MY EIGHTH JOB of the year on 21 November in Salt Lake City, and it was party time when 9:00 P.M. came around. Sure, I only had to work till 7:00 — the new Have-a-Life law was in effect — but nobody observed it. If you had a job it was work time, and if they paid you to sit in a cubicle crunching numbers twelve hours a day, it was fourteen they really wanted and everybody knew it — so it was work hard, party in your dreams, then work hard some more starting 6:30 A.M. sharp.

Life in America.

Life, that is, till you could buy your way *out* of America.

I'd rented a one-bedroom with nine other guys, and the rent bothered me — I needed to invest that money, not hand it over to some landlord geek — but it was winter, and no matter how I added up the numbers it was cold outside. In summer you don't need to rent. You can stay on the streets with your friends and talk investments, pick up tips on hot stocks, tie into your accounts through streetside netstands to do your buy and sell and check interest and dividends and, when you can't calc numbers anymore,

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sleep between high rises till you wake before dawn to check your accounts again. It's a good life, but it doesn't work well in winter. You don't want to walk around all night just to stay warm. You decide you have to pay rent.

I stopped at a netstand. There were six guys and one long-haired Japanese ahead of me. I'd seen her on the streets before. She was wearing unisex black cotton pants and a black blouse buttoned over the neck, black boots, belt, coat — homeless chic — and she looked good. She traded in weird commodities like krill and heavy metals. She grinned when she turned the booth over to me. "Silver's up," she said.

"Cool," I said, not thinking it was cool at all — it couldn't have been up that much. Metals never were. I punched into my netbank account. My new employer had transferred over the day's pay, on schedule. I surfed to the Bombay Stock Exchange, open in North America's night, and bought three shares of Vindhya Pradesh biostock, then I surfed to my on-line broker and placed orders to sell my Hitachi at the open in New York and use that money to buy twenty-five more Vindhya Pradesh at the Bombay open tomorrow. I'd get up at 3:00 A.M. to check the price: if Vindhya Pradesh closed too high tonight, I'd cancel the buy order and look for another bargain.

I shoved my way out of the booth, headed for my apartment, and saw this guy I'd never met before sitting on the granite lip of a flower planter, his red hair cut short, his black eyes watching me walk up the sidewalk, grinning to himself. I stopped in front of him, hands in my pockets to keep them warm. You never know who can turn into a decent business contact. I'd need a new job in eight weeks when my contract ended. "Nice night," I said.

"Nicer now," he said.

That stopped me. "Nicer now" didn't sound like this guy wanted to do business, at least not with info and such. I thought maybe I should just walk away. Seeming the least bit attracted to another guy wasn't safe, and this guy was showing interest approaching the unsafe. But I decided maybe I wasn't thinking right. I decided cultivating a business contact was the right way to think.

"Kurt," I said by way of introduction. I stepped closer and stuck out my hand. "Bio-genetic stocks, human tissue futures."

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"Michael," he said, standing up and shaking my hand. "Bio-genetic stocks myself, pan-Asian infrastructure."

That could be interesting, I thought. I didn't know much about pan-Asia. We stood there talking Mongolian heavy industry in the cold. "Let's get some coffee," he said after we'd stamped around for a while. He took me to a new coffeehouse, the Java Kayenko, where we ordered hot brew, plugged into the net from units at our table, and talked.

I liked him. I liked him a lot. I realized at some point that anybody listening to our words might think they added up to courting, not business, because we didn't talk just pan-Asia and human tissues. I started getting nervous and looked around. One beefy guy waiting at the counter looked away. Great, I thought, so somebody had taken notice. The other customers all sat hunched over their tabletop netscreens. None of them was paying us any attention that I could tell, none seemed to be eavesdropping for information to sell a Human Resources Department. The beefy guy walked past us and sat at the next table, back to us, alert, sipped his coffee.

Michael stopped talking, sipped his own coffee, looked at me. All I could think was: I need my job. I surfed to a systemwide newsnet so I could watch the beefy guy and the people around us for a time, not for the info. I turned the screen so only Michael and I could see it. The lead story was about how farming improvements on Mars had led to the first significant drop in agricultural imports from Earth. Big deal, I thought — except that someday I wanted to be eating Martian food.

"That's where I'm going," Michael said, quiet. "To the People's Republic of Mars."

"Yeah," I said, not really listening. "Me too." The other top stories were about the Earth-based people-control crazies closer to home and their parade of new laws. I clicked on one, but was ready to click off in a hurry. Congress had that day passed its Just-Keeping-Track "Gay Problem" law by a not so narrow margin. Now single men and women twenty-eight and older had to register with the police. If they changed their residence or employment they'd have to reregister in two weeks or face stiff fines. Listed amendments included one that barred single men over thirty-eight from maintaining off-world holdings. They could invest only on-world if they wanted to stay American — easier for the government to

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track their money, I figured, to control it, to get their hands on it. The lead substory was about some gay New York designer agonizing over whether to sell his boutiques on the Moon and Titan Station or just head out and abandon Earth — the fool, I thought. As if he had to wonder. *He* was somebody the new worlds would welcome.

So when do they start rounding up people? Michael typed.

I just shook my head and erased his sentence. I had one year before I'd have to register. I wondered what the police would say if I was living on the streets then and had no address?

Tina, the girl who worked the counter, headed our way to refill our cups and I clicked back to the Martian agriculture story. Tina knew Michael by name, but Michael told me she was his sister. The Japanese woman walked in, and *she* knew Michael. "Hey, Keiko," Michael said.

Keiko walked over. "What you doing hanging with this human-tissue geek?" she asked.

Look who's talking, I thought, Ms. Silver's Up.

"That's my business," Michael said.

Keiko eyed me up and down, then moved on.

"You trade with her or something?" I asked.

"Info," he said. "Her heavy metals, my Asian infrastructure — it's a match."

I could see that. I could also see I had relationship work to do with Ms. Keiko. You don't want bad vibes even from somebody who trades in heavy metals. You never know when you might need help with something that strange. What I couldn't figure was why she was angry with me. We'd hardly ever talked.

A man at least six feet three inches tall walked in. He wasn't wearing homeless chic — he wore the real thing: dirty, torn jeans; thin, red coat. He stank past us into the back room and said hello to Michael on the way, slumped onto a couch by a heater. His coat had Mars Terraform Project patches on the sleeves. "Authentic," Michael said. "He hated it out there. Bad as it is here, it's better, he says. I don't believe him. I'll make it when I get up there — I have better reasons for going and making it work."

Tina walked over to refill the sugar canister on our table. "Somebody stole the tip chit yesterday," she told Michael. "A guy I'd never seen before

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hung around the place. He claimed to be waiting for a phone call. I thought that sounded weird. Why would he wait for a phone call here? E-mail maybe, but a phone call? Five minutes later, I turned around and he was gone and the chit was gone. I'll recognize him if he walks back in."

A customer stepped up to the counter. Tina went to get him what he wanted.

I'd had enough. I was nervous and wanted out. "The next work-day's coming," I told Michael. "I'd better head to my rent-sink."

Michael looked at me. He'd looked handsome when I'd first met him. He looked even better now. I wanted out of the Java Kayenko, but I hesitated to stand up and go.

I have a place two blocks over, I typed.

I live on the street, he typed back. *Pan-Asia isn't cheap.*

I thought about that. *Come over*, I typed, finally. *The floor's warm. I have an extra blanket.*

OK! :), he typed, grinning. *But I can't leave now. I don't want Tina to log off this place alone. It's a cold night. That ex-terraformer is in a warm place — he might not want to leave.*

I thought about that and ended up waiting with him. The beefy guy left ten minutes before closing. He stared at Michael and me on his way out. The ex-terraformer left the third time Tina asked him to go. Tina lived upstairs. She waved good night as she locked the door behind us.

Part of me thought I was stupid to be taking Michael home. Part of me asked why I would posit an equation I'd wanted to solve but couldn't — not here, not on Earth.

Part of me couldn't stop.

The other guys I lived with were all home, and two of them had also brought friends off the streets. Soon it was lights out. Michael got up with me at three o'clock to check stock prices. He beat me to the shower in the morning. We left for work together.

Two days later, the day Salt Lake had its first real snowfall of winter, I sublet the space on the floor by my bed to Michael, and he moved onto it, which was good: he helped pay my rent. He had to stay out of everybody else's space, but he did that, and every night after work, after the

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coffeehouses, he'd lie in his blankets, and I'd lie on my bed, and we'd talk about everything: all the places we'd worked the past year, December liver futures, how we'd handled the last downturn, our goals for getting off Earth.

"Do you think we'll ever make it?" Michael asked me one night. He was wearing his Monkey Mother T-shirt, one some biology professor had given him just before Congress passed its No-Monkey-for-a-Mother law that barred teaching evolution in public schools and universities receiving federal funds.

"We'd better," I said. "Both our mothers were monkeys."

Michael laughed, but my answer wasn't just a joke. If you saw something ugly coming at you, you were smart to get out of its way. There was ugly coming at us from all directions.

I wished our mothers had been Martians.

WORK GOT WEIRD. First, I had an e-mail from HR telling me a citizen had come forward offering information about my personal life sufficient to warrant a Suspicious Activities Investigation. HR put me on notice that they would have to:

- Read all my current and archived company e-mail, checking for violations of company policy.
- Monitor my use of company computers till the end of my contract (as if they hadn't been doing that already).
- Interview co-workers in an attempt to discover whether I had ever violated company policy.
- Contact former employers to see whether similar complaints had been lodged in the past, complaints not deemed credible enough at the time to warrant an investigation.

If it was discovered that my personal conduct at work had in any way violated company policy, and if it was discovered that my personal conduct after hours had damaged or might damage the reputation of the company, my contract would be terminated. In that case, the company reserved the right to instigate legal proceedings to recover real or possible damages. A copy of the investigation's final report, whatever the outcome,

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would become part of my Permanent Work Record, available to any future employer.

Fine, I thought. Let them look — they wouldn't find anything. I'd never dreamed of doing anything remotely suspicious on a company computer, with co-workers, on company time, at any company I'd ever worked for. But then I started worrying about whether somebody somewhere could have misunderstood something I'd said or done — and if they had, the company could sue me for imagined damages and take my money and make it impossible for me to ever get to Mars. I had to leave before then. I had to leave before the investigation was finished. That was all I could think. I tried to stay calm — I knew lawsuits could drag on forever, that I probably had plenty of time, that the investigation might not result in a lawsuit — but I worried anyway. I damn near shoved my fist through the computer monitor.

HR called to ask me to come down to sign a First Amendment waiver, and by late afternoon they called again to tell me they'd cleared my past e-mail. "All strictly business," the HR bastard said.

"What did you expect?" I asked him. "This whole thing is a waste of time. And how much did you have to pay the fine citizen who complained about me?"

He wouldn't answer that, nor would he tell me what the nature of the complaints had been, but I could guess. Then, for days at a time, I couldn't get out of the office till after 10:00 P.M., with no lunch or dinner breaks. If I ate at all I ate packaged crap from vending machines. It was a lot of: Hurry up and finish this. Get this project done! Why aren't you done yet? When can I have this? How long do you think this will take?

I was beat.

I wondered if they were trying to make me quit.

I got in line at the first netstand after work one night to do my buy and sell, and who should be holding up the line but Ms. Silver's Up herself, Ms. Keiko. Time to patch up differences with that contact, I thought. She turned away smiling from the netstand. The line moved forward. "How's silver?" I asked her when she walked by. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I got out of silver," she told me. She stopped and looked me up and down, still smiling. She's made some great deal, I figured, and now she wants to talk about it. Brag a little. Fine by me.

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"I thought silver was up," I encouraged her.

"Oh, it is. I sold all of it and a little of this, a little of that, used a little inheritance, and now I'm part owner of a ship heading out to mine the asteroids after another month of outfitting Up Top. I'll be on her when she leaves."

"You made it!" I said. I was genuinely impressed. It wasn't often that you heard of somebody who'd actually made it.

"I'm buying drinks tonight at Club Blue for a few old friends. You've been a rude little shit and you've got the attention of a guy I wanted, but if you come down I'll buy you a drink. Bring Michael."

I just stood there, too shocked to say anything. People had heard what she'd said. People stared at me, and the guy next to me stepped away — who wouldn't if you overheard talk of some guy having the attention of another *guy*. "I don't want your drink," I told her.

People were still staring. Keiko just laughed and walked away. She looked back once and smirked. I hoped I'd never see her again.

I bought three more shares of Vindhya Pradesh biostock with the day's wages, then put in an order to sell my Sony at the New York open and buy more Vindhya Pradesh. I checked the price of passage to Mars. It had dropped two point five percent because the new Titan shipyard had finally come on-line. I now had enough for a one-way and the secondhand gear I'd need. Michael found me later in the Java Kayenko. "It's almost one in the morning," he said. "I got worried."

I just looked at him. That he'd gotten worried and come looking worried *me*. What were we doing? Where were we headed? I wanted to be angry with him. I wanted to be angry enough to cut short his sublease of my floor-space, but I didn't and I wasn't angry, not with him anyway. Keiko had worked through my equation. People I didn't even know were complaining to my company. How many others were going to add two and two and arrive at four before I could get out of here?

Michael pulled up a chair and sat down — and I let him. Why not, I thought? What's another Suspicious Activities complaint on my record? "Did you see the newsnets?" he asked. "Check this out." He called up an article on the new Truth-in-DNA law that mandated testing all government employees for the gay gene. If your results came back positive, you

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were fired. There were vids of surprised people being led out of their offices to the streets, claiming they hadn't known, that the gene was a shock to them. Already the ACLU had gone to court to challenge the firings. There was plenty of speculation about how else the law was going to be applied — how gay men and women couldn't hide anymore in marriage — but I got tired of reading it.

"Let's get some sleep," I said.

"I want to help Tina log off first," Michael said.

We helped her log off, then started across the parking lot for home. Our steps were the only steps in new snow. Suddenly Michael grabbed my arm and jerked me toward him. We fell into a planter filled with dried, dead flowers and snow. A car without lights on sped past and barely missed us.

"Die, Fags!" people yelled as the car sped into the street.

It was an old car, heavy, retro twentieth-century chic. You could smell its exhaust, and you could hear it. If it had been electric, Michael wouldn't have heard it coming. I didn't recognize the car or the voices. Michael and I stood and brushed ourselves off. Lights flicked on in three windows around the parking lot. Tina called down to see if we were all right.

There was no point in reporting what had happened — the police would just ask what we'd done to make a carload of guys decide we were fags. Michael and I went home to bed. But a short time later I woke up. Michael was sitting on his blankets, looking at me in the dark.

"What are you thinking?" he asked after a time.

We couldn't talk here — people sleeping around us might wake up and hear. "Let's go check our stocks," I whispered.

We pulled on our pants, boots, coats, and headed out to a netstand — nothing unusual in that. The streets were empty. We looked for cars, then started walking down the sidewalk, our breath misty around our faces in the cold. "It's not what I'm thinking," I told him. "It's what I'm feeling. If I stop to think about this, I'll get too scared."

He reached out for my hand, and I let him. We walked along in shadow, holding hands. For a few steps I couldn't breathe. It was the first time we'd touched like that. His hand felt warm and good and strong. I couldn't move my hand away, though I knew I should before someone

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saw what we were doing. I wanted to touch more of him than just his hand.

"How long before they use those tests to restrict travel?" he said.

"I have enough to leave now," I told him.

"I'm close. Tina isn't."

"Tina?"

"I can't leave her."

We were almost to the netstand and its island of light. I let go of his hand. "Why does she have to go?" I asked while he logged on.

"Same gene," he said, and I looked around to see if anybody could be listening, but we were alone on the street. I knew the studies: if there was one gay person in a family there were likely two, and if there were two they were likely a brother and sister. It was going to take Tina a long time at counter wages to save passage off-world.

He turned the netstand over to me.

"I want to go to Mars with you," he said.

"I want you to come, too," I said.

"No," he said. "You don't understand. I want to go with *you*."

It was say something now or never. He'd said his part. I hit the Exit key and turned to look at him. "I'm not leaving without you," I said, and I meant it. I looked at him and realized I meant it — investigation or no investigation.

He smiled at that. So we'd done it, I thought. There was no going back.

I took him to an alley I knew and we held each other and kissed and touched, but we heard something down the alley and hurried back to our separate beds. After a while he slept. I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking, kept trying to come up with a way for us to leave together soon. Sure, we could keep working, saving, and investing, but emigrating to Mars evidently meant bringing his sister — which was fine. If I'd had a sister with the gay gene, I'd have helped her get away, too. But it was going to slow us down. And it was probably just a matter of time before they started investigating Michael, maybe Tina, too.

I ran through the options we had besides work and more of it: no bank would loan Michael and Tina money to go to Mars — they had no collateral to secure a loan. Mars has aggressive immigration-assistance programs, but it reserves its slots for people with technical expertise or

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some unusual skill. Number crunchers like Michael and me — and counter help like Tina — weren't on their lists. But as I lay there thinking, I realized I maybe knew a way, though I didn't like who we were going to have to talk to about it: Ms. Keiko, of course — she with the money to buy a ship; she with a ship in need of workers. Maybe she'd loan Michael and Tina some money. Maybe she'd let them work for partial passage. Maybe. It started to feel like a game of chess: move a piece here, move a piece there, move key pieces onto squares of power.

I HAD AN E-MAIL from HR the next day telling me that six of my former employers had cleared me, two had received Suspicious Activities complaints not credible enough to warrant an investigation (but they had forwarded the texts of those complaints), thirty-six had yet to respond. No word about the interviews with my current co-workers.

Michael and I met Tina in her apartment before her shift to talk about Keiko and make plans. Both knew that Keiko had problems with me, but they got along fine with her and thought my idea worth a try. They had, of course, to come up with as much money as possible before asking Keiko for the rest. Tina didn't have much.

"What can you do to get more?" I asked her.

She looked at Michael. "I have some heirlooms," she said, finally. "Dishes that have been in our family for generations. Mother gave them to me. It's all I have of hers."

"Depression glass," Michael said. "One of our great, great whatever grandmothers got it at her wedding. It was cheap then."

"What's it worth now?"

"Last time I checked, a lot," she said.

We went downstairs, logged onto the net, and checked current prices at seven antique sites. She had twelve dinner plates in a pattern called *Miss America*, plus eight dessert plates, eight soup bowls, ten water glasses, one water pitcher, twelve cups and saucers, a cake plate, three serving bowls, two platters, a candy dish, a cream and sugar. It added up to two-thirds passage and decent gear, or full passage and part of the gear.

"But I don't want to lose those dishes," Tina said.

"Do you want to get off-world?" I asked.

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She hesitated. She looked at Michael. "This just seems so unreal," she said. "Can things really get much worse?"

I logged off and logged back on using a Java Kayenko guest ID — which they'd charge for, but the only way I'd surf to a gay newsnet was as Mr. Anonymous. If anybody out there was keeping track, all they'd be able to tell was that some customer of the Java Kayenko had spent time on the wrong side of the Gay Problem. We pulled up the Lambda Legal Defense Fund's chronology of the Gay Rights movement and its failure; how all it had gotten in the past century was this government to accord separate-but-equal treatment and a few major corporations to offer what they'd called "domestic partner" benefits to gay couples, but how unceasing religious intolerance and increasing political conservatism had finally triumphed here and everywhere — how the New Conservatism had swept the world. Its anti-gay plank blamed gays for everything from "moral corruption" in the arts to falling birthrates in the Industrialized North. Governments that had at first refused to rescind equal-rights laws for gays did so under threat of sanctions. Denmark had held out for two years before giving in — the record on Earth. The LLDF site had an archive of every antigay pamphlet and tract, book and law written and passed by churches and governments in 206 countries. We just looked at the lists of titles that scrolled by screen after screen.

Then we surfed to a gay newsnet and pulled up stories not reported anywhere else — like the one from Reno: four guys had driven a thirty-three-year-old gay man named Fred into the desert to kill him. They'd beaten him till they'd ruptured his spleen and one kidney, then they'd pulled him to his feet, cocked their rifles, and told him he had sixty seconds to run. He'd made it over a barbed-wire fence into a dry ditch, and they'd started shooting. He'd crawled into an irrigation headgate, and they hadn't been able to find him in the dark. He'd already registered with the police, so when they came to the hospital to get his statement, they'd assumed he was gay and had provoked his assault; his insurance wouldn't pay the medical bills because of the police reports; he'd been fired from his job. We read similar stories from New York, New Jersey, Missouri, Washington state — never mind the incarcerations in China and the executions in Zimbabwe and Central Asia.

Tina decided to sell her dishes.

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* * *

Michael worked a second job sweeping public transports at the downtown terminus on his lunch hour, so I offered to take a lunch break and help Tina carry her dishes to an antique store to get them appraised and sold. When I got to her place she was standing at the sink, washing the dishes. They sparkled, pink, in the sunlight. I took a towel to help dry them. The bottom edges were molded in patterns of tiny, three-sided pyramids that caught the light and made the glass look like cut crystal.

"Mother always kept them perfectly clean," Tina said. "They're a little dusty now."

We wrapped each dish in paper and packed everything in three boxes. Tina taped the boxes shut, then looked at me. She didn't say anything for a time. She just held one of the boxes. "I can't do this," she said finally. "I can't take them and sell them. Would you do it for me?"

"Sure," I said. I felt bad for her, then. I took the boxes and left, walking ever so carefully around ice on the sidewalks.

We'd researched the prices. We knew the going rates for depression glass — Tina even sent printouts — so the dealer I went to couldn't cheat her, though he would have liked to do so: he had to take out a short-term loan to pay for the dishes. She got a fair price. I helped her invest her money. By the close that afternoon her stocks were up.

I worked till 10:30 the next night, then did my buy and sell, then met Michael and Tina and looked around for Keiko.

She wasn't on the streets. We checked the coffeehouses and downtown bars. We stopped at a netstand to send her an e-mail. Before we'd finished one cup at the Java Kayenko we had an answer.

Keiko was at the Rio Grande sitting at a table under a picture of a man smoking *inside* a building.

"Last chance for some decent Mexican," she said over her plate of enchiladas and refried beans.

We pulled up chairs. "We want to talk about your ship," I said.

"Oh honey, it's hiring staff, but we want people with off-world experience, something none of *you* have." She smirked at us.

"We want to go to Mars," I said. "I can pay for my passage, on your ship or any other."

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She put down her fork. "This is fun. Let me guess: You can pay and are oh so anxious to leave this hell-hole, but Mr. Cute Redhead — a guy you don't think you can live without — can't pay, and neither can his sister whom *he* won't leave."

"Shut up," I said. People at other tables were staring. If this deal didn't go through, we were in real trouble.

"We need to borrow some of the money," Michael said.

"Or work off the passage," Tina said.

"Just like that. And I suppose you want *me* to loan you the money? I suppose you think there's some on-board espresso bar in need of a coffee bitch to scrub its counters?"

Michael and Tina looked at me, dismayed.

"How do I know you'll ever pay back the principle plus the twenty-two percent interest I charge?" Keiko went on.

I started thinking I shouldn't have suggested this. I started thinking I shouldn't have gotten Michael's and Tina's hopes up.

"Money's tight for me," Keiko said. "I'm not sure about any loan to anybody."

"How about working for passage?" Tina said. "You're part owner of a ship — it might not be money you could loan us, and there has to be work we could do."

"Ship has to turn a profit," Keiko said. "It's not a nonprofit training course for charity cases." She finished her enchiladas, and none of us said anything till then. A waiter cleared away her empty plate.

"So what do I get out of this?" Keiko asked. "Not you, Michael Redhead — unless boyfriend Kurt will let me have you Tuesday and Friday nights?"

Michael just laughed.

"You'll get your interest," I told Keiko. "I'll help them pay it."

"I bet you will," Keiko said. She logged onto the tabletop netscreen. "Let's get this over with. The rate's, like I said, twenty-two percent. This isn't a favor. Tell me how much you need and what you'll be using it for."

Michael handed her printouts of the best prices we'd found for Martian gear, and Keiko verified each price at discount warehouses on the net. She finally agreed that what Michael and Tina were asking for was right. She accessed a legal site and sent the necessary paperwork to the

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restaurant's printer. Michael left to find that and brought back the papers. Tina and Michael signed for the loan. Keiko scanned in their signatures, then registered the loan with her on-line bank. She transferred the money to their accounts.

"First payment's due in one month," Keiko said.

"We'll pay it on time," Tina said.

"You're damned right you will," Keiko said. "And in addition, we'll see what all of you can learn on-ship while you work for partial passage. None of you has any experience, so you'll be handed grunt work nobody wants — but it will save some of your precious money. Besides, I'm not sure this bank approves of its creditors sinking into another gravity well. Maybe you'll like it on-ship."

"It's Mars for us," Michael said.

"How do you know it will work out better there?"

We didn't, of course.

"Mars is a frontier world," I said. "They won't waste time on genetic testing. They need anybody who can work."

Keiko smirked at that. "You're probably right," she said. "And you'll grow old and die before that changes."

We all left the restaurant.

"Why don't you tell Kurt about yourself?" Michael said to Keiko when we were outside. "You've outed him and me. It's only fair."

Keiko stopped walking and turned around to look at us.

"You say it, or I will," Michael said.

But Keiko didn't say anything. She took my hand and rubbed it against her cheek. I felt stubble there. "The drugs do a pretty good job of controlling this," she said. "But they wear off."

I hadn't guessed. I had not been looking for that in her. I knew now why she always wore turtlenecks or buttoned her shirts over the neck — to hide her Adam's apple.

"Why do you think I helped you?" Keiko asked.

We spent two nights on-line after work taking the competency tests Martian immigration requires. Keiko was wrong about the value of Tina's work skills off-Earth: the Martian Department of Labor estimated it had sixty-two food-service positions to fill each month and half that many

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applicants for the jobs. Since Tina had experience — not just at running a coffeehouse late at night but at logging it off and totaling the accounts — companies started e-mailing good offers to her, and she'd accepted one before we'd left: one with the promise of working into management. Michael and I did all right, too. Between us, we had eight interviews lined up with decent companies, including two brokerage houses. We got the necessary certifications from the Martian Secretary of Labor. The visas came in two weeks from the embassy in D.C.

We bought work-for-partial-passage tickets on Keiko's ship, said our good-byes, quit our jobs. My company told me they would complete the investigation and, if it found against me, their lawyers on Mars would contact me. Fine, I thought, let them. My money would be spent by then. I was leaving just in time.

We went Up Top to finish getting outfitted for Mars. We bought all the gear we could in Salt Lake, on the net, or Up Top — if you arrived on Mars without some critical piece of equipment you could plan on paying top dollar for thirdhand junk. On our last day, we sat with our gear looking down at the Earth. It was beautiful from high up. You couldn't see the tests people were being forced to take, the new laws, the growing fear. We were lucky, and we knew it.

Michael pulled a small package wrapped in burgundy paper and white ribbon out of his backpack and handed it to Tina. "Open it," Michael told her. "It's from Kurt and me. A good-bye Earth surprise."

Her hands trembled as she undid the ribbons and the wrapping, opened the box, folded back the white tissue paper, and lifted up one of four Miss America depression-glass dessert plates. They'd been her ancestor's. I hadn't sold them. I'd kept those four plates back so she'd have something her mother had given her. The plate sparkled in the harsh light of the dock. Tina couldn't talk, not even to thank us.

"We washed them before we packed them," I said. "They had fingerprints all over them."

Michael had agreed with my not selling the dessert plates, but we'd needed to make up the money for Tina, so he and I had settled on secondhand respirators instead of brand-new ones — but we'd bought new filters and replaced the oxygen tanks, then spent days overhauling them, oiling them, testing them, making sure they'd work for as long as we'd

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need them before we could afford to buy new ones, which would be in about a year and a half, I figured. Forty-six shares of Vindhya Pradesh biostock had brought in the rest of the money.

"We'll need something pretty to look at where we're going," Michael said.

I thought about that. It hadn't been so long before that people had made those plates — in the Depression, in a time of suffering. I looked down at the Earth. They still made beautiful things there, I thought. Maybe the continued making of beautiful things and the way we value beautiful things from the past should have given us hope that the world wouldn't go completely wrong. I didn't know. We could not risk staying to see.

Tina rewrapped the plate and put it back in the box. She kissed Michael, then she kissed me.

We did not have long to wait before we boarded our ship out.

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Lawrence Connolly is the author of numerous horror short-short stories which have appeared in such venues as Year's Best Horror Stories, Rod Serling's Twilight Zone, 100 Great Fantasy Short-Short Stories, *and* 100 Fiendish Little Frightmares. *Several of his short tales have been optioned for film. He lives in the suburbs of western Pennsylvania, in a township by the name of Moon. (No fooling, it's not far from Mars, PA.)*

This devious tale was inspired by his love of two of sf's greatest humorists, Fredric Brown and William Tenn and does well filling those big shoes.

Prime Time!

By Lawrence C. Connolly

"WILL YOU TAKE THE JOB, Mr. Underwood?"

Underwood looked around at the rows of telephone solicitors. Some faced computer screens and spoke into headsets. Others ate at their desks. A few ambled sluggishly toward a door marked "Employee Rest Area."

The office looked like a decent place to work, but Underwood, who really wanted to begin his professional life as something better than a telemarketer, still had questions. "Did you say that your people place calls to all fifty states?"

Mr. Singleton gave a balding nod. He was a bird-like man — beaked nose, diminutive chin, and wide eyes that filled the concave lenses of his glasses. "Also Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Canada," he added.

"And —" Underwood hesitated. This was the one detail of Singleton's operation that he still had trouble grasping. "Your computer system allows you to place calls on a time delay?"

"More than that. It allows us to place calls at any time and still reach prospective customers at six in the evening."

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"Dinner time?"

"Prime time!" Singleton said. "At Singleton Marketing, it's always prime time!"

"So if I come to work in the morning at eight — "

"Nine. You can arrive earlier, but we only require our workers to be here from nine to five."

"So I come in at nine in the morning, I place a call, and someone answers at six in the evening?"

"Precisely! Prime time! Dinner hour! Best time to reach two-income families."

"So I have a conversation with someone who's not going to hear my voice for nine hours?"

"Exactly!"

"I hear them and they hear me?"

"Just so!" Singleton beamed. Then, softly, he added, "Of course, all employees sign a contract prohibiting them from using the system for personal gain." He chuckled. "Now, if you're interested, you can start tomorrow." He gestured toward an empty desk. "We try to retain good people, but when someone feels he has a better future elsewhere, we let him go. Fortunately, most choose to stay."

To the right of the empty desk sat a silver-haired man with tired eyes. To the left was a woman with blond hair and a face that looked as if it had been hung out to dry.

"Your neighbors will be Mr. Royal and Ms. Corona."

Underwood glanced at his watch. It was 5:02. "Shouldn't they be going home?"

"Some of our people put in extra time," Singleton explained. "No reason not to. We have excellent facilities." He gestured toward the rest-area door. "And remember, whenever a Singleton solicitor places a call, it's prime time!"

Underwood soon discovered that telephone solicitation was hopelessly boring work, and after a week of sitting between the tired-eyed Mr. Royal and the sagging-faced Ms. Corona, he began hatching a scheme to make the system work for him.

His plan was simple. At 9:00 A.M., using the Singleton lines, he telephoned his own apartment. He hoped to reach his future self and get

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the day's closing stock reports. Instead, he got Singleton.

"What's going on?" Underwood asked. "What're you doing in my apartment?"

"Taking care of business, Mr. Underwood."

"Where am I?"

"Why, Mr. Underwood, you're at your desk, placing a call — "

"I mean, where am I *there*? If you're in my apartment, where am — ?"

"I'm afraid you're not here, Mr. Underwood. In fact — " A pause, and then: "I'm afraid you're dead."

Underwood realized that the tired-eyed Mr. Royal was staring at him from the next desk.

"You're dead," Singleton said again. "Not dead on your end, of course. But here, in the six o'clock world of final stock reports, you have become the *late* Mr. Underwood."

Underwood leaned forward. He felt dizzy.

"We can't have people making time-shifting calls for personal gain," Singleton said. "It would wreak havoc with the system, not to mention the space-time continuum. I'm sorry, Mr. Underwood. If it's any consolation, there's still a place for you at Singleton Marketing."

Now Ms. Corona was staring at him too.

Singleton's voice crackled in the headset. "By placing a call to your future self, you forced us to take corrective action. You were — or should I say *will be* — killed after leaving the office. The death will be painless and swift. You didn't — that is you *won't* — see it coming. However, if you choose to never leave the office — "

Royal and Corona continued to stare.

Underwood choked. "Mr. Singleton, please — !"

"Cheer up," Singleton said. "Think of all the people who work for companies in which they have no future. You, on the other hand, have no future except with the company. Welcome to the family, Mr. Underwood!"

The line went dead.

"They monitor our calls," Mr. Royal said.

Underwood's computer scrolled to a new account. Auto dialing kicked back on. A ringing line purred in Underwood's earpiece.

"They had nine hours to get to your apartment before your call went through," Ms. Corona said.

"Cheer up," Mr. Royal said. "Life here isn't as bad as you might

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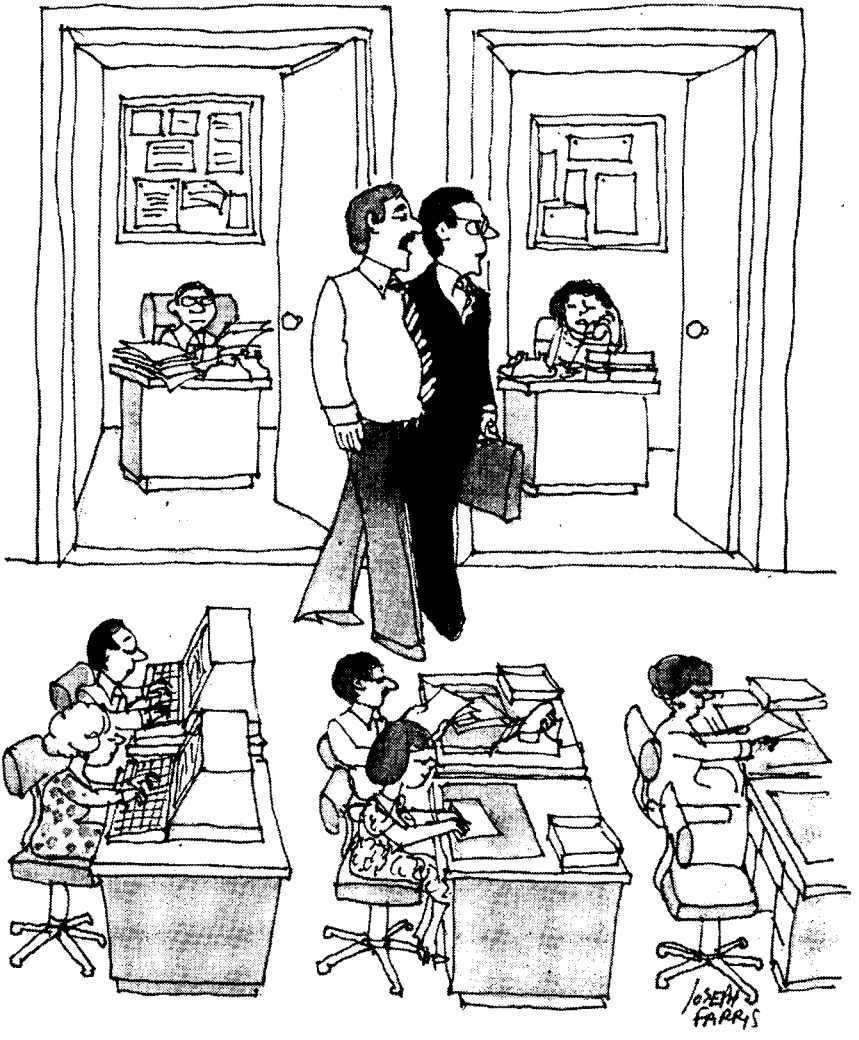
think." Then, with a dry chuckle, he delivered the punch: "It's worse."

The line stopped ringing. A voice answered: "Hello." Dinner dishes clattered.

Prime time! ☙



"The downsizing seems to be going well."

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

EXPLORE YOUR WORLD

WE sometimes describe the Exploratorium, the museum where we work, as a museum of science, art, and human perception.

Frank Oppenheimer, the museum's founder, pointed out that human perception is the starting place for both art and science. In an article titled "Aesthetics and the Right Answer," he wrote: "Art and science are very different, but they both spring from cultivated perceptual sensitivity. They both rest on a base of acute pattern recognition. At the simplest level, artists and scientists alike make it possible for people to appreciate patterns which they were either unable to distinguish, or which they had learned to ignore in order to cope with the complexity of their daily lives.... One can see only a bland flesh color in faces until a Rouault makes one aware of the violent blues and reds and purples that actually appear. Similarly, one can observe the planets rise and set without becoming aware, as Kepler did, that they are moving in ellipses about the sun."

As writers, scientists, and Exploratorium employees, we have learned to be experts at noticing things that most people are inclined to ignore. This is, ultimately, one of the best parts of the job. In this column, we thought we'd call your attention to some of the natural phenomena that we love to point out to those around us. We hope that you will enjoy looking for them in the world around you.

IMAGES OF THE SUN

Have you ever noticed that the shade beneath a leafy tree is dappled with round spots of sunlight? The gaps between the leaves aren't round; they're all sorts of irregular shapes. But the light that shines through those irregular gaps makes round spots.

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Many years ago, artist and former Exploratorium exhibit builder Bob Miller pointed out to us that those spots of light are images of the sun. The gaps between the leaves are acting like the pinhole in a pinhole camera, focusing an image of the light source — the sun.

Beginning with this observation, Bob Miller developed a series of experiments to investigate this phenomenon. You can find them on line at http://www.exploratorium.edu/light_walk/light_walk.html.

Or you can simply admire the dappled ground beneath a tree and know that you are standing beneath a natural, leafy, pinhole camera.

Shadows at Night

While working on *The Science Explorer — Out and About*, a book of science activities for kids, Pat became obsessed with shadows. She watched shadows by day, becoming fascinated with their movement. That obsession led to a year-long project tracking the sun's movement, documented in our column, "The Shadow Knows" (August, 1999). Pat also became aware of the shadows that follow her on any night-time stroll through her urban San Francisco neighborhood.

On any urban street corner, odds are you'll cast a collection of shadows — one for each bright light source in your immediate vicinity. On one corner near her house, there are three streetlights, and Pat casts three shadows, each one pointing in a different direction. Streetlights, porch lights, illuminated signs, and the headlights of passing cars all create a wonderful array of constantly changing shadows. As you walk past a light source, your shadow will change position — falling behind you as you approach the light, beside you as you pass it, and before you as you leave it behind.

We can't tell you exactly why watching shadows is so interesting. Perhaps it has something to do with the malleability of shadows, shape-shifting doppelgängers that dog our every step. There's something fascinating about watching your shape shift and change. But we suggest you go for a walk in the city at night and watch for shadows.

Reflections on Transparency

One evening, while riding the N Judah, a municipal train that rattles and sighs through the streets of San Francisco, Pat became aware of reflections in a new way. The train's overhead lights were bright

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and the train's windows reflected the train's interior — the bright orange walls, the advertisements inside the train, and the weary faces of her fellow commuters.

Through the reflections, Pat could catch glimpses of the outside world — but that outside world collided with the world she could see reflected in the windows. People strolling past a brightly lit doorway walked without hesitation through the reflection of Pat's head. When the train stopped, a woman in a white rain hat stepped outside and disappeared, becoming invisible in the gloom. But her white hat didn't disappear. It bobbed cheerfully away, moving through the reflected newspaper of the man behind Pat.

When light shines on window glass, about 92 percent of the light passes through the glass and about 8 percent reflects back. At night, looking at the window of a brightly lit room, you can see your own reflection — the 8 percent bouncing back is brighter than the 92 percent coming in from the gloom outside. A stranger outside your house can see you — the 92 percent coming through from the room's interior is brighter than the 8 percent of the light outside bouncing back to him. At some balance point, when the lighting on both sides of the glass is just right, reflected light and transmitted light compete.

Ever since that moment on the train, Pat has kept watch for those balance points where reflections compete with reality. These moments amuse her. The world is a changeable place, she says, and clarity sometimes depends on your point of view.

Floaters in Your Eyes

During the long hot Connecticut summers when she was in elementary school, Pat spent many hours lying in the grass of her family's suburban lawn and watching the things that drifted in the cloudless blue sky. The thing she watched most frequently looked like a tangle of transparent threads that had come together in a shape that looked vaguely like a stick figure of a horse. Early in her sky watching, she realized the drifting shape was not in the sky, but in her own eyes.

It wasn't until Pat came to work at the Exploratorium that she found out that drifting horse shape was a bit of junk floating in the liquid in front of her retina. These bits of junk, generally known as *floaters*, are often the remnants of blood cells or structures that were part of the eye when it was developing.

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You can easily check your own eyes for floaters. On a clear day, stare up at the blue sky and relax. (Pat suggests lying down on a grassy hillside and imagining you are on summer vacation, but that part isn't really necessary.) Chances are good that the blue will be marred by at least one floating translucent form. Once you've spotted a floater, you can figure out which eye it's in by closing one eye, and then the other. If the floater disappears when you close an eye, that's the eye it's in.

Seeing floaters requires you to pay attention to visual stimuli that you usually ignore. To learn about other things that you can see in your own eyes, check out Pat's web site at www.brazenhussies.net/murphy. In the meantime, use this as an excuse to do a little sky watching—and maybe take a well-earned nap.

Lightning

While Pat contemplates soothing sights like dappled shade and reflections, Paul urges you to watch lightning, one of nature's great shows. He remembers leading a group of hikers up Cotopaxi, a glacier-covered mountain in Ecuador. Cotopaxi is best climbed at night; by day, the hot equatorial sun turns the snow to slush, making climbing difficult. Paul says, "I noticed flashes of light off to the east. Huge cumulonimbus clouds carpeted the Amazon basin. They were alive with lightning flashes. The best part was that I was above them. I had seen images of Amazonian lightning sent to Earth by space shuttle astronauts; here I was getting the same view and I had earned it by walking up a hill. Presented with this spectacle, I just stopped and watched. To this day I'm glad I took the time to look. I still get chills down my spine when I think about what I saw that night."

You don't need to go to Ecuador to find lightning. In most areas of the United States, the lightning will come to you. The safest place to watch lightning is from inside a metal car, which acts as a Faraday cage, protecting you while conducting the electrical charge to the ground. And being safe is a good idea while watching lightning: The moving charges in a lightning bolt heat the air to ten times the temperature of the surface of the sun, rip air molecules apart into ions, and create a hot incandescent plasma that snakes its way to the ground.

While you are contemplating the power of the lightning bolt,

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notice the path of lightning. Is the bolt forked, with branches that stop before reaching the ground? If it is, it's the first bolt. Some flashes repeat more than a dozen times in a second. Subsequent bolts follow the path that the first bolt has blazed to the ground, ignoring the dead end branches.

Notice the color of the flash. Paul reports seeing amazing blue flashes during snowstorms, colored by ice crystals in the air. (For a real psychedelic light show you can even look at a lightning storm through a diffraction grating. Inexpensive ones can be purchased from Edmund's Scientific). To scientists, the spectrum of the lightning reveals the identities of ions excited by the bolt and their temperatures.

Thunder

While you're watching lightning, we suggest you pay attention to the thunder as well. The thunder from the nearest part of the bolt arrives first followed by sounds from more and more distant parts of the bolt. The thunder paints an acoustic image of the shape of the bolt. When a bolt jogs to the side so that it is perpendicular to your line of sight, it makes an extra loud boom since all of the sound from that part of the bolt arrives together.

In September of 2000, when he was taking a break from writing this column, Paul camped in the Cirque of the Towers, a high glacial basin in Wyoming. A lightning storm blew in quickly and he retreated to the tent he had pitched in a moderately lightning-safe place. To follow the approach of the storm, he counted the seconds between the lightning and the thunder. The distance is one kilometer for every three seconds of delay. Many flashes were followed by thunder less than a second later, indicating that the flash was less than a football stadium length away.

Listening to the thunder, Paul noticed something he had never heard before. There would be a flash of lightning, followed a second later by a relatively quiet boom of thunder. Then, after two more seconds, the thunder suddenly became loud. Flash...booomBOOOOM. This was a puzzle: Why would the closer lightning channel produce less sound? Then Paul realized that the lightning was striking behind a ridge. The sound waves from the nearest sounds were bending or diffracting over the ridge, greatly reducing their sound intensity. After listening to thunder for more than five decades Paul had heard a new

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effect. It always pays, he says, to look at and listen to nature.

Meteors

Paul seems to do a lot of climbing at night. While hiking up Mt. Hood at night, he noticed strange flashing lights on the snow in front of him. He looked up into the clear sky to see meteors! It was a night of the Perseid Meteor shower, and the snow was reflecting the meteor light. A couple of times the meteors ended their flight in a bright explosion known as a bolide. Perhaps the most startling thing is that the explosions are completely silent. You can wait and wait and the sound will never get to you. (Remember: in space, no one can hear you scream.)

The best time to watch meteors is after midnight on a night when there is no moonlight. Then you are on the leading side of the earth as it sweeps through space, pulling meteors into its gravitational field. The bright flashes of light that we see are caused by bits of dust and debris, burning up as they drop through Earth's atmosphere. Most of the objects that make meteors are bits of debris blasted off of asteroids during collisions or shed by comets. They orbit the sun, traveling at tens of kilometers per second, and flash into incandescence when they hit the earth's atmosphere.

When you spot a meteor, notice its path. During a meteor shower, the meteors will all seem to radiate from one point in the sky. Meteor showers are named after the constellation containing that point. The Leonids seem to come from Leo, for example, and Geminids seem to come from Gemini.

Some meteors move faster than others across the sky. Paul has seen a wonderful bright green light from a meteor, possibly an indication that the meteor was passing through a layer of oxygen, which glows green when it absorbs and re-emits energy. Sometimes meteors leave "smoke" trails behind them. These trails get blown around into fantastic shapes by high altitude winds.

Patience is required to watch for meteors. You may have to watch for half an hour to see just one. Relax and enjoy the other sights and sounds of the night sky. Rejoice when you see an extraterrestrial visitor.

For instant gratification, take a magnet outside and drag it around near the outflow of your downspouts. It will collect bits of iron

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and iron oxide. Many of these bits came from meteors.

Eclipses

Whatever it takes, we suggest you go and see a total solar eclipse. Paul has seen four, Pat has seen one, and they have all been spectacular and different. Paul once traveled to Chile to see an eclipse. Watching the eclipse over an erupting volcano next to a herd of alpacas made it clear he wasn't in Kansas anymore!

When the shadow of the moon falls on you and you look up to see the sun eclipsed in the sky, your body responds physically. One of the things your body knows is that the sun is not supposed to vanish from the clear sky in the middle of the day.

Just before an eclipse, the sunlight turns a very strange yellow orange. Animals begin to settle down into twilight behavior. People run around setting up telescopes and getting cameras ready. Paul lets others photograph and record the eclipse; he just settles back to watch. He uses a safe viewing filter during the partial eclipse, but as totality starts, he looks with his naked eyes. It's awe-inspiring to see a white spider of the solar corona spreading out from the sun into a black sky.

When you are watching an eclipse, glance at the ground just a minute before totality, when the sun has been reduced to a narrow crescent. During a recent eclipse in Turkey, Paul was amazed to see dark shadows creeping across the ground. These are shadow bands, caused by ripples in the air. Just as ripples on the surface of a swimming pool cover the bottom of the pool with patterns of light and dark, so ripples in the density of the air, caused by difference in temperature, can make bands of shadows on the ground. These bands are only visible when the sun is reduced to a smaller size than normal, as it is during a solar eclipse.

Last word

We hope that you will continue exploring the world around you. Take the time to stop and look and marvel at the strange and marvelous ways the universe works. Have fun!

The latest book by Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty is Traces of Time, *published by Chronicle Books. You can read more of Pat's work at www.brazenhussies.net/murphy and more about Paul's adventures at www.exo.net/~pauld.*

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Long before Bill Gates rented an entire island for his wedding, people have speculated on the question of whether the richest people in the world can find love. Jonathan Lethem, John Kessel, and Jim Kelly pondered this question in their story "Ninety Percent of Everything" a couple of years ago. Now Carolyn Ives Gilman takes a very different look at this theme—along with several concerns about the future...

The Real Thing

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

IN THE END, THE KEY TO time travel was provided by Lawrence Welk.

It happened in the vicinity of Peapack, New Jersey. One evening during February sweeps, all the television sets that still had antennas started emitting accordion music and grainy black-and-white champagne bubbles. It lasted only a few minutes, but viewers of *The World's Most Gruesome Accidents* flooded the station with complaints.

Pranksters was the first theory. But videotapes of the event deepened the mystery. It had been a live broadcast from the 1960s, and no tape of it was known to exist. Attempts to pinpoint the source of the signal failed until the Defense Department reported that one of its satellites had also picked up the bubbly broadcast. It had come from outer space.

Aliens was everyone's second thought. Green men had picked up our planet's electromagnetic ambassador and, in a mortifying commentary on Earthling musical taste, returned him to sender. But when the scientists at Princeton turned their attention to the spot of sky from whence the

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beam had come, they found no planets teeming with music critics. Instead, they found evidence of the closest black hole yet discovered.

They announced what had happened in a packed press conference where none of the computer graphics worked, and the physicists resorted to scribbling diagrams on pads of paper. The television signal, launched in the 1960s, had traveled outward into space for twenty or twenty-five years before encountering the black hole. There, unimaginable gravity had bent a portion of the signal around in a U and slingshotted it back, focused and amplified in the weird electromagnetic environs of the singularity. Peapack had had the honor of passing through the returning beam. If future viewers picked up reprises of *Bonanza* or *Mister Ed,* no one should be alarmed.

What happened next was more secretive.

It had occurred to the scientists almost at once that it would be possible to use the black hole to send a message to the future. What very few of them knew was that in a secret research institute outside Boulder, Colorado, experimenters had been perfecting a new method of space travel. With a particle beam, they disassembled an object, recording its molecular structure. That information, encoded into a beam of clarified light, was sent to a receiver that reassembled the object in its exact original configuration. They had started by sending gumwads and bottle caps across the laboratory, and graduated to begonias and rabbits. There had been a few messy slip-ups, but we won't go into that.

The drawback of this system for space travel was that you needed a receiver at the other end before sending anything through. It would be necessary to ferry receivers out to the stars by slow, conventional means. But with a handy black hole to boomerang the message back, sending someone to the future was a real possibility.

"Don't worry, we'll leave a note on the refrigerator," the scientists joked to their volunteer time traveler, when she raised the point that someone in the future would have to be expecting the message.

What else could they say? There were no guarantees.

The volunteer's name was Sage Akwesasne, and she stood out in the army of balding math nerds — not only because she was as tall and lean as the Iroquois hunters of her ancestry, but because she was a person who took in much and said little. Not even she could have explained why she had volunteered for such a hazardous experiment. It certainly wasn't deep

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trust in the reliability of scientists. She was a newly minted postdoc in an era with few job prospects, but that wasn't it, either. There was just something about the idea of flaming across the parsecs as a beam of pure information that appealed to her.

No one consulted OSHA, or got a permit for black-hole travel. They just did it.

THE FIRST THING that came to Sage's mind, after the electric shock that re-started her heart, was surprise that it had worked. She was lying on a polished steel surface, covered with a thin hospital blanket. Experimentally, she wiggled her fingers and toes to make sure everything had been assembled in the right configuration.

An elderly man with a large pocked nose and wild gray hair leaned over her. A doctor, she thought, concerned for her health. "Sage," he whispered urgently, "don't sign anything."

Whatever happened to "How do you feel?" Perplexed, she sat up, clutching the blanket. After a moment of vertigo, she saw that she was in precisely the kind of place she had expected: a laboratory full of enigmatic devices. She looked back at the assembler machine that had just reconstituted her. It looked bigger and more well-funded than the one they had had in her time. "What year is it?" she asked.

The man gave a sheepish, tentative smile. There was something familiar about him. "Five years later than you were expecting. I'm James Nickle, by the way. Oh, here." He remembered to hand her a bathrobe he was carrying.

"Jamie," she said, too detached to be embarrassed she hadn't recognized him. He had been a graduate intern on the project. Then, he had been a peculiar-looking young man with a large pocked nose and wild brown hair.

"You came in on time, just as we planned," he explained as she pulled on the bathrobe. "But you've been on disk for a while."

"On disk?" she said blankly.

"Yes, because of the court case. You were impounded until they figured out who owned your copyright."

"My copyright."

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There was a discreet cough, and Sage realized that another man had entered the room. This one was small and sleek as a ferret, dark-skinned and bearded. Something about his immaculate cuffs and narrow lapels said "lawyer." With a restrained manner he came forward and said, "I am Mr. Ramesh Jabhwalla. I represent the Metameme Corporation. I regret to have to inform you that you are not Sage Akwesasne."

"I'm not?" Sage said.

"Legally, you are a replica produced through a patented process, using proprietary information owned by the Metameme Corporation. It is our contention that your copyright resides in us."

Sage wasn't sure she was getting this straight. "You mean, you've copyrighted my story."

"No," said Mr. Jabhwalla. "You." He opened his briefcase and showed her a large data disk with a stylized MM logo on it. "The code that was used to create you."

"You're crazy," Sage said. "You can't copyright a person."

Behind Mr. Jabhwalla's back, Jamie was nodding vigorously. But the lawyer was unperturbed. "They patented the human genome," he said. "That was the legal precedent. There is no substantive difference between the biochemical code to create a human and electromagnetic code to do the same."

Jamie said apologetically, "It's why this technology has never taken off. All the legal questions."

Sage's head was spinning.

Impeccably polite, Mr. Jabhwalla said, "However, Metameme has recently decided not to continue pursuing the case. The copyright question will remain moot. Instead — " he fished a thick, blue-covered contract out of the briefcase and presented it to her — " we are offering you a contract with our wholly owned subsidiary, PersonaFires. They will market your persona for a very reasonable twenty percent commission, plus expenses. It's a good deal, Ms. Akwesasne-dupe. Most people would kill for a PersonaFires contract. Sign here." He offered her a polished wood fountain pen.

No doubt the twenty-four dollars' worth of beads for Manhattan had seemed like a good deal at the time. "And if I tell you to get lost?" she asked.

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"Then, who knows? We might be forced to create a more agreeable duplicate of you."

"You can't do that!"

"Can't we?" Smiling pleasantly, he lifted the briefcase with the disk an inch.

"Then I guess I have to think about it."

He hesitated, but seemed to sense Jamie scowling over his shoulder. "Very well," he said, and pocketed the pen. "Till then, allow us to be your host in the twenty-first century."

She got down off the assembler slab, ignoring Jabhwalla's offered hand. Standing in bare feet, she was six inches taller than he. Jamie ushered her into a bathroom where there hung a many-pocketed jumpsuit that made her look like an African explorer when she put it on. She examined herself in the mirror, wondering if her nose had really been so long before.

Mr. Jabhwalla was waiting when she emerged. He led the way to a door, but paused before opening it. "I'm afraid the press knows about you," he said.

The next room was packed with reporters. When she entered, the sound of cameras going off was like a bushful of crickets. Round-eyed video recorders tracked her every move. "Sage! Sagie! Honey, look over here! Have you signed with Metameme? What do you think of the future? How does it feel to be so many years out of date?"

Three people crowded forward to shove endorsement contracts at her, talking fast about tie-ins and face time and profit exposure. Others tucked business cards into her pockets. In seconds, the room was a muddle of elbows and frenzy. Then Sage saw Mr. Jabhwalla's hand wave, and two bodyguards in suits with Metameme logos waded in on either side of her, clearing a path to the door.

They came out into an airy, high-ceilinged lobby, pursued by cameras and action. The bodyguards were hustling Sage along so fast she barely had time for a glimpse. "Where are we going?" she said.

Mr. Jabhwalla answered, "I am taking you to meet the most powerful man in the world."

"The President?" Sage said, astonished.

The lawyer looked taken aback. "No, do you want to meet him?" He glanced at one of the bodyguards. "Hans, who *is* president, anyway?"

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"Don't know yet," Hans answered. "The election is day after tomorrow."

"Oh, of course. Well, that has to wait. Today you are going to meet D.B. Beddoes, Chairman of Metameme."

Glass doors drew back before them. At the curb waited a white limo equipped with approximately half a block of tinted glass. One bodyguard opened a door; the other propelled her inside. She was thrown back against soft leather as the car took off.

The dark inside of the limo looked like an electronics store, screens everywhere. An out-of-shape, rather pasty blond man in wire-rimmed glasses was seated in a swiveling recliner, viewing a recording of Sage getting into the limo. He was wearing a baggy sweater, jeans, and bedroom slippers. He scrolled the picture back to the point when Sage entered the roomful of reporters, and watched it again, jiggling his leg restlessly. "That went well, don't you think?" he said.

Mr. Jabhwalla had been flung into a seat opposite her, but he was not the one who answered. Instead, a young woman whose skin was startlingly dyed in gold and black tiger stripes said, "Right on script." She leaned forward to offer a friendly hand to Sage. "I'm Patty Wickwire, President of PersonaFires. We're an image marketing company."

"I've heard of it," Sage said.

"Yes, I know."

Patty looked too young to have a job, much less be company president. She was wearing a leather vest and tiny shorts that showed off her picturesque skin. Her hair was piled on her head in a teased and tousled whirlwind. Little objects were caught in the cyclone of hair: a cigarette, a tiny working television screen, a miniature Statue of Liberty. Sage thought she detected irony in the choices.

"You've got to approve some photos of yourself for replication," Patty said, directing Sage's attention to a screen at her side. "I've already weeded the bad ones. Press 'Accept' to send them out to auction."

The photos had been taken moments before. They were unrealistically flattering, as if they had been doctored. "They must have taken three hundred photos of me," Sage said.

"They can take them, but they can't replicate them without paying a royalty," Patty explained. "Every image is proprietary. Laws have

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improved since your time. All you need is someone to enforce them for you."

Sage pressed "Accept" to see what would happen. Across the car the doughboy was talking on a wire headset. He said, "The photo's going on the block right now, number 47. See it? No, don't buy it, you dipstick, we want it in *Elite* or *Hip*. That's the fashion image we're imprinting on the upscale set." With an air of savage, myopic concentration he studied a screen in front of him. "Damn! It went to Fox. Okay, change of plan. Replicate her jumpsuit in denim, under fifty bucks. Flood the Bargain Bays. Can you do that by tomorrow? Good man." He poked the screen and it switched to a complicated 3D chart. "Hot damn, will you look at that! Her penetration's close to 80, and it's been logarithmic since 40. Her contagion index is off the charts. She's taking over the bandwidth like smallpox."

"You're a genius, D.B.," Patty said in a tone that implied he already knew.

He checked another screen. "Endorsement bids are rolling in nicely. Disney and ATW are duking it out for rights to the action figures, the biopic, and the immersion game. The plastic surgeons are waiting for the specs on her face." He peered through wispy bangs at Sage. "Thank God they didn't send some bald guy with bad teeth." A terminal beeped. He turned to it. "The photos sure went fast. Congratulations, Ms. Akwesasne. You just made your first $30,000."

"That was easy," Sage said.

His face lost all semblance of softness. With a cold intensity he said, "No, it wasn't. You have no idea how hard it was to set up the system that just made you all that money."

Sage focused on him more clearly. No one had introduced him, presumably because he needed no introduction. It occurred to her that this was no man to trifle with. His puppy-dog looks hid a carbon-fiber personality.

"Why are you selling the specs on my face?" she asked.

"That's the business we're in, Ms. Akwesasne. Sorry, I thought Jabhwalla filled you in. Metameme is an information wholesaler. We don't usually do end-product consumer delivery; there are lots of companies in place for that. We buy from information producers and supply the data to publishers, manufacturers, media outlets, and other businesses."

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"An information middleman," Sage said.

"Right." A terminal was warbling; he swiveled around and touched the screen. "Hi, Steve. What's up?" He listened for a moment. "No, she's from turn of the millennium. Golden age of innocence, remember? Mass markets. Marriage. Internal combustion. When they thought jaded hackers would hippify the world. If you're interested, I've got a whole line of classic revival concepts posted for bid. Use access code 'Nostalgiapunk.'" He jabbed the screen off. "Sheesh, how do these people stay in business, so far behind the curve?"

"You're selling information about me?" Sage said.

"Brokering it for you. Don't worry, you're getting royalties. You're very lucky you landed with us. We're the best as well as the biggest. I've run the projections myself. As intellectual property, you could go exponential."

"Wait a minute," Sage said. "What if I don't want to be a celebrity?"

D.B., Patty, and Jabhwalla all stared at her as if the words "don't want to be a celebrity" weren't in English. D.B. was first to recover. "It doesn't matter," he said, leaning forward, suddenly intent and earnest. "In a way, this isn't about you at all. It's about the *idea* of you, and that transcends all of us. You answer a yearning in the culture. Our world is hungry for heroes. The brave woman who gave up her life to become a beam of light, and traveled around a black hole to come back to us — it's Promethean, it's Orphic, it hits us at this limbic level. You are a heavenly messenger. And if you don't pull it off with style, you'll disillusion a generation of kids, and people who still want to believe the way kids believe. You've come to redeem us from our cynicism, and I can't let you let us down."

Everything but the flicker of screens was frozen for a moment after he stopped speaking. Then D.B. shook his head, as if emerging from some kind of fugue state, and turned to Patty. "Did you get that?"

"Yup," she said, holding up a recorder.

"Put it in a marketing plan or something," he said.

For a moment there, he'd practically sold Sage to herself. With a pang of disappointment, she forced herself to be skeptical. "Then why did you keep me on disk for five years?"

D.B. blinked as if the question had ambushed him, but he only lost one beat. "Five years ago we weren't ready for you," he said. "You would

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have gotten your fifteen minutes, and that would've been it. Today, you could be the next wave. I don't just mean popular, I mean dominant paradigm." He turned to Patty. "What is your marketing plan on her, anyway?"

Patty bit her lip. "Actually, D.B., I need to run it past you."

"Of course," he said.

"No, I mean, it's a little bit novel."

"Novel's good."

"Let's talk about it when we get to the house."

"Yes! What the fuck is it?" he snarled at the air. For a moment Sage thought he was having a psychotic episode; then she realized a call had come in on his headset.

The video screen at the front of the car showed the road ahead. They were entering a one-lane tunnel. Ahead, a steel gate rolled up to let them through. They passed a manned checkpoint, then rolled to a stop next to a set of elevators. The car windows went transparent, and Sage realized that there was no driver. Mr. Jabhwalla got out and held the door for Sage, the perfect gentleman. Meanwhile, D.B. had gotten absorbed in a densely detailed discussion with his caller. He gestured them on, never glancing from his terminal.

As they waited for the elevator, Patty said in a low voice to Mr. Jabhwalla, "Maybe you better stay with the Idea Machine, in case he has another inspiration spasm. I'll take Sage up."

Mr. Jabhwalla nodded. Patty and Sage got on the elevator. Patty's stripes undulated when she moved.

"So, what do you think of D.B.?" Patty said when they were alone.

Sage shrugged. "Nothing wrong with him a little Ritalin wouldn't fix."

Patty laughed nervously. "He's my client, too, you know. I've been trying to get him to ditch that geek-boy persona. It was useful at first; everyone bought into him as eccentric genius mogul. But it's gotten old. He needs to grow up."

"Maybe it's just who he is," Sage suggested.

Patty shook her head. "He is who he needs to be to run Metameme. It's not an insurgent startup anymore. He's a public figure now, and this isn't the twentieth century."

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After a long ride, the elevator doors opened onto an airy entry hall. The front wall was glass, three stories high, and looked out on a dramatic mountainscape. They were at a high elevation; patches of snow lingered in shadowed spots, and a bank of clouds hid the lowlands below. The room had been built around three old-growth white pines that soared up to the skylight roof. At their base, a Japanese fountain played in the sunlight.

"I thought you might feel at home in the millennium suite," Patty said. "I'll show you now, while we have some time." She led the way up a sweeping cedar and slate staircase to a landing adorned in Tlingit and Kwakiutl art. Three hallways radiated from it.

The décor of the millennium suite turned out to be late-1990s luxury hotel, teal and beige. The only inauthentic touch was that video screens were everywhere — in the ceiling above the bed, in the surface of the dining table, in the wall opposite the toilet, behind the bathroom mirror — not to mention the six-foot-square one that filled an entire wall. "You have access to all the major infoservices here," Patty said proudly, as if Sage was supposed to be impressed.

"Who normally lives here?" Sage asked, feeling the pampered anonymity of the room.

"Well, this is D.B.'s house, but he only uses a couple rooms. The rest are for business guests."

"So, no patter of little feet?"

"Children? God, no! Where would those come from?" She made it sound inconceivable.

Sage sat on the bed, cross-legged. "So I guess the information trade pays off?"

"For D.B. it does," Patty said, sitting next to her. "It's like he channels the Zeitgeist or something. He was first to use memetics in the infobiz. Did they know what memes were in your time?"

"There was a theory. Memes were supposed to be units of information — like ideas, tunes, fads, rumors — that supposedly replicated themselves through the population the same way new genes spread. The idea was that people caught memes like viruses, and spread them to others. There was speculation that you could come up with an epidemiology of knowledge. No one had ever done it, though."

"Well, D.B. did it, or something close. He figured out the algorithms

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to model the spread of memes on the net. It was like cultural weather prediction. He could forecast what kinds of information were going to be in demand, and then he'd go and sew up the market before anyone knew what he was up to. He made his first killing when he figured out that a little food-taint scare in Belgium was going to go nonlinear. He borrowed fifty million dollars and bought up rights to a whole pile of university test results. Pretty soon the world was clamoring to know the food chain was safe, and the bioag companies didn't know whether he was holding positive or negative results. They paid top dollar to buy back control of the info."

"But — that's blackmail," Sage protested.

Patty shrugged. "So? Times change. Usury used to be illegal; now we call it interest. Anyway, Metameme expanded into information supply. Tracking trends is still its bread and butter. But D.B.'s moved on. Today, he's more interested in memetic engineering — creating and propagating memes deliberately."

"You mean starting fads, so he can be ready with the merchandise?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds. If anyone really knew the formula for a successful meme, he'd have made a billion billion by now."

After giving her instructions on how to find D.B.'s office when she was ready, Patty left. Alone, Sage went into the bathroom, thinking of taking a shower, but found that the shower stall had no spigot, and was lined with fat glass tubes. Cryptic safety instructions on the door led her to stand in the stall, arms raised and eyes closed. There was a flash of light, a puff of air, and she stepped out again, clean down to the roots of her hair. It was an enormously pleasant discovery. All the time and labor wasted on personal hygiene would be miraculously restored to her day. She understood now how Patty could maintain the elaborate hairdo — it could stay in place for a month without growing dirty.

Considerably refreshed, she looked into her closet. It was full of clothes, all her size, but she did not trust herself to assemble any of it appropriately, so she stayed with her jumpsuit. Lying back on the bed, she decided to turn on the ceiling monitor, but could find no controls, only a laser pointer on the bedside stand. Experimentally, she pointed it at the screen, and the terminal flashed on, presenting her with a menu. She discovered she could use the pointer to make selections.

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Quickly she navigated to a news service and found she was the headline news, completely eclipsing the coming election. She surfed from site to site, seeing the same photos and video clips she had approved for sale, but given a variety of spins. To her surprise, not a single one was complimentary to Metameme or D.B. Beddoes.

He was described as everything from "secretive infomagnate" to "indicted monopolist" to "evil genius." Paging to a background piece, she learned that the court battle over her copyright had been brutal to Metameme's image, and only in the last few days had it become clear that the company was going to lose. Then, without warning, Metameme had abruptly reversed position and substantiated her without consulting anyone. The uproar now was about why she had been whisked away into "Castle Metameme," and what the evil genius had in mind. A senator spoke threateningly about human rights violations.

She, on the other hand, seemed quite popular — the broadcasts dwelt lovingly on beauty-enhanced photos of her mysterious appearance before the reporters, her gawk transformed to glamor. With some ambivalence, she realized there was already a duplicate Sage Akwesasne in the noösphere — an image passed from brain to brain, growing more vivid at every step — chic, magnetic, untamed. It was no one's creation, and everyone's; but no one else had such power to alter it, or *be* it.

Sage flicked off the screen and lay musing. The twenty-first century was a forest primeval, it seemed; but she was more than just wolf bait. She had hunter instincts herself, honed in the Darwinian jungles of Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was a match for this world.

The hallways of D.B.'s house were sepulchrally silent. Sage was tempted to explore, but put it off. She needed to follow the track of information now. Patty's directions led her past the pine tree room, down a hall, and through a security door that opened to her thumbprint. A camera swiveled to watch her cross the foyer.

D.B. was alone in his office — except for the virtual presence of several harried employees on a double bank of monitors that served him for a desk. He was pacing up and down in stockinged feet, talking on his headset and brandishing one of his bedroom slippers. The other one was lodged on a tall bookshelf where he had apparently flung it. There was a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich and a Coke abandoned next to an unplugged keyboard.

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"Am I surrounded by morons?" he was saying. "Haven't you ever heard of *schadenfreude*?" Seeing Sage at the door, he beckoned her in and pointed his slipper at a chair. She sat. "Yeah, *schadenfreude*. The feeling of pleasure at someone else's misfortune. Public figures get a popularity boost whenever something bad happens to them. Unpopularity is bad, so it's self-correcting. At least, that's the theory. Give it a chance, okay?" He thumbed the touchscreen off and slumped into a leather office chair. "My own PR department thinks I'm nuts."

Sage said, "Well, you *are* getting pretty badly beat up on the net."

He swiveled to face her, staring intently through round lenses. "Have I violated your civil rights?"

"I don't know," she said. "Have you?"

He didn't answer, just drummed his fingers on the arms of his chair. He seemed incapable of sitting still.

"So you sell information," she said.

"Yeah," he said, still drumming, preoccupied. "Engine of the economy."

"In my day we thought information ought to be free and available to all."

"Well, that's how capitalism expands, by commodifying what people find valuable. The Native Americans thought you couldn't buy and sell land, and where are they now?" He focused on her suddenly and said, "Oh, sorry. I forgot about your ethnic identity. That's amazing hair you've got, by the way."

"It comes with the ethnicity," Sage said tolerantly.

"I figured. Makes for great graphics."

Patiently, Sage steered the conversation back to him. "There's got to be a lot of perfectly worthless information out there. How do you know what's valuable?"

A flash of boyish animation came across his face. "That's the question! That's the whole question. On one level, it's the same as any other commodity: what's scarce is valuable, what's abundant is not. When I first got into the business, no one had any control over supply, or any way of forecasting demand."

"How can you get control over the supply of information?" Sage tried not to let on how sinister she found this.

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"Not by hiring a bunch of information workers," D.B. said. "That's how a lot of companies went broke: they weighed themselves down with payroll. I put my money on entrepreneurship. I offered global brokering for knowledge workers — engineers, image designers, researchers, programmers, composers, graphic artists, scriptwriters. Anyone with a viable product could come to us, and we'd package it, find a buyer, and get them top price. God, it took off. Pretty soon all the content providers were going independent to get out from under the stale old corporate work models, and I was everyone's best and biggest market. Companies started economizing by laying off their information producers, because they could buy ideas better and cheaper from me."

For a moment, he looked nostalgic for old times. Then he snapped into focus again. "But the real question is still your first one: what information is valuable? Obviously, I'm not out to buy *all* of it, only what there's most demand for. Well, without giving away trade secrets, there's a near-insatiable demand for certain kinds of information; you can always sell more. Other kinds don't repay the cost of production. To oversimplify, it's governed by the Urge Pyramid. At the broad base of what people want are the primal urges: fear, sex, hunger, aggression, and so on. Only after those are satiated do people want to be stimulated by beauty, novelty, sentiment, and the other mid-level urges. And at the tiny tip of the pyramid is desire for rational thought; it's the last thing people want. Information is nutrition for the brain, same as food. We've got to have it, roughly in the proportions of the pyramid."

"Your view of human nature is way cynical," Sage said.

His reaction was abrupt and angry. "I've made a couple hundred billion based on my assumptions. What's *your* proof?"

She didn't react, and as quickly as his anger had flamed up, it was gone. He started wandering around the room, his hands in his pockets, talking. "The way *not* to do an information-delivery system is top-down. You can't give people what you think they ought to have, you have to give them what they ask for. Elitist distribution systems get all caught up in accuracy and ethics, quality and high culture. Like ballet on television, for cripes sake, and not wrestling. It's not just unprofitable, it's undemocratic."

"Wait a second," Sage objected. "A democracy depends on a well-informed populace, citizens who know the issues. How can people have

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a sense of investment in society if they're flooded with urge-fulfillment programming, and not quality information?"

"Spoken like a true elitist," D.B. said. "You want to dictate to the populace instead of trusting them to demand what they need. Democracy is all about giving people what they want. That's why the free market is the most democratic institution ever invented."

"Even if it deprives people of accuracy and ethics?" Sage said.

"Oh, accurate, ethical information is still out there," D.B. said. "It's just expensive." To her astonished stare he said defensively, "Well, it costs money to get the story right, and there's less demand for it. Wonks *ought* to pay a premium."

"But that means — "

"Listen," he interrupted, "I don't just have populism on my side, I've got natural law, too. Free markets operate according to the same underlying principles as ecosystems. The driving forces in both cases are competition and natural selection. Innovations are constantly getting injected into the system, and competition sorts out the ones that are viable. Or innovators form coalitions that are more viable in symbiosis — and then the other organisms call you a monopolist and take you to court." For a moment his voice grew bitter.

"Never mind, this is the point: in the information market, rival memes are always competing for habitat space in our brains, and the successful ones are the ones that are most contagious. You know what makes a successful meme?"

"Uh...a true one?" Sage said.

"Wrong! Couldn't be wronger. A successful meme is one that tweaks its host's urge pyramid, and makes him want to pass it on. *True* memes are actually at a competitive disadvantage. You know why? Because, oddly enough, the world doesn't work in a memorable or interesting way. That's why fiction is so much more satisfying than truth: it caters to our brains, and what they want. Reality needs to be productized in order to be convincing."

One of D.B.'s terminals was buzzing urgently; he thumbed it on. A bright-looking young man appeared, clearly nervous at speaking to the boss. "D.B., I think I may have a solution for us." He saw Sage, and froze, staring.

"Go on," D.B. said.

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"Right. You know there's a war in central Asia."

"There's always a war in central Asia."

"Well, we've got atrocity reports coming out now. Refugees. I thought we could push them really hard."

"As a *distraction*?" D.B. said, incredulous. "Oh, right. Like no one's ever thought of that before. Sheesh. Give 'em some credit."

The young man looked crestfallen. "Oh. Well then, what should we do with this war?"

"We've marketed three wars in the last six months," D.B. said, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Their sponsorship potential's crap."

"Oh, we've got some insurance companies and HMOs interested. We can make it a brand-name product."

"Well, run the projections, then. I think the mass markets are saturated with refugees; it's become a cliché." He pondered a moment, then said, "I know. Pretend you're trying to downplay it. The egghead outlets will think we're trying to suppress something, and they'll jump all over it. They're total suckers for suppression."

"But then *we'll* become the story," the young man protested.

"So? You will have sold your war."

"Well...okay." The screen went dark.

D.B. turned back to Sage. She said, "How can war become a cliché? A cliché is rhetorical; war is real."

He shrugged. "We don't lead. We are led."

"Oh good, I've found you," Patty said, standing striped and windblown in the doorway. A flash of irritation at the interruption crossed D.B.'s face, but he snagged a loose chair and rolled it over the carpet toward her. As she sat, she looked hintingly from her boss to Sage and said, "D.B., have you...?"

He snapped his fingers, remembering, and turned to Sage. "I forgot, I was supposed to be suborning you with lucre. Well, I'm sure you picked up the subliminals." He gestured at the rest of the house. "This could be yours, and so on."

"D.B.!" Patty protested, annoyed at him. "That's — "

"That was charming," Sage said. "I'm touched."

"Touched enough to sign a contract?" D.B. said, suddenly purposeful as a nail gun.

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"No."

"Oh, well. Tell Jabhwalla I tried." He turned to Patty. "So what was this marketing plan of yours?"

Patty shifted nervously in her chair, looking about fifteen. "D.B., you've got to promise not to get mad when I say this."

"What are you talking about?" he said. "I never get mad."

Sage laughed out loud. "Sorry," she said, covering her mouth.

"All right, this is my idea," Patty began.

D.B. had settled in his chair; now he sprang up again. "Let me tell you my idea first."

Resignedly, Patty said, "Okay."

"This isn't based on research; I've just got this gut feeling."

"Your gut is golden," Patty said. Sage didn't think it was entirely flattery.

"I think the outsider angle is going to catch on. The visitor from a simpler, more innocent time comes face to face with our complex, corrupt world — and conquers it through natural goodness."

"Kind of a noble savage thing," Sage put in ironically.

"Yeah, Rousseau without the colonialist baggage."

"That's great, D.B.!" Patty said enthusiastically. "It fits right in with my idea."

"Which is...?"

"Well, who's the ultimate symbol of the complexity and corruption of our time?"

Patty paused; no one answered. "*You* are, D.B.!" she said. "She's got to conquer you!"

He looked utterly blank. "I don't get it."

"Love, D.B.! You bring her into your house for some questionable end, but her natural goodness turns the tables, and you fall for her. No one will expect it. It'll humanize you, make you sympathetic. The man who never has to compromise is finally conquered by love."

There was a long pause. D.B. was motionless for the first time since Sage had seen him.

"You're not mad, are you?" Patty asked.

"I'm not mad." He turned away from them, brooding.

"You've got to move forward, D.B.," Patty coaxed. "Your image needs this."

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Without turning, D.B. said, "I think you'd better ask her."

Sage had been wondering when they were going to get around to that. "Let me get this straight," she said. "First you try to copyright me, then you abduct me, then you try to suborn me. Now you want me to collaborate in a false scenario you're selling to the press."

"Right," Patty said. "Jerking around the publicity machine."

"And this is going to benefit me how...?"

"Oh, your stock will soar," Patty said. "Can you imagine, the richest man on earth? This is the ultimate image synergy."

"Just imagine for a moment that I don't want the publicity," Sage said. "Can you give me one reason why I should do this?"

D.B. looked at Patty; Patty looked at D.B. The idea flow seemed to have run dry. At last D.B. ventured, "For the fun of it?"

Sage kept thinking it couldn't get any more surreal. "Listen, you may find this quaint or naïve. But I'm a scientist. Scientists are trained not to lie. I can't lie for you."

D.B.'s expression was awestruck. "My God, Patty," he said. "Do you know what she is? She's the real thing. The real fucking thing."

MORNINGS (Sage learned the next day) were, by tacit custom, set aside for catching up on news and communications. It was the only way people could consume the enormous amounts of information required to keep the economy humming.

The terminals in Sage's room boasted a vast array of competing infoservice subscriptions, each combining a different mix of television, phone, fax, rental movies, games, chat, shopping, and a host of less familiar options, all accessed through the Internet. Choosing a service at random, she tried to do a search for the people and project that had sent her here. In minutes, she felt awash in junk information. A search engine that claimed to specialize in history linked her to a nostalgiafest of pop culture from the last forty years — celebrities and entertainers, scandals and scuttlebutt. She tried her favorite encyclopedia site. The brand name was still there, but the entries had all been auctioned off to advertisers. Her searches for scientific subjects kept turning up "Top Hit Topics" pushed by their sponsors. On a whim, she queried the encyclopedia for

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Leon Trotsky, and found him missing in action. Not profitable enough, apparently. No market potential.

At last, remembering what D.B. had said, she backed out and found a way to arrange the list of his infoservice subscriptions by cost. His monthly bill was staggering. An average person could obviously afford only a single service in the midrange — and in that range, there were only a few clonelike choices. Below them, cheap services clustered like vermin in the cracks, offering colorful, kinetic interfaces like Saturday morning cartoons, but only rudimentary access to bargain shopping, pornography, lotteries, and sports, heavily larded with advertising. So she headed for the high end. The true vastness of the information resources only became apparent here, where the search engines were sophisticated enough to find them. But they were not free. Oddly enough, the higher the price of admission, the rawer the data became, until the business and professional portals opened onto arcane libraries of unmediated information, like the neural architecture of civilization.

Her whirlwind tour of the infoverse left her thoughtful. She leaned back, sipping a liquid the interactive house menu called "starbucks," which she had correctly intuited was coffee. Clearly, the Internet had not turned into a cyber-fairyland where heroic hackers ruled. On the contrary, it was about as radical as a suburban mall, and served much the same purpose. Most of what people could find there was not information at all, but processed information product — Velveeta of the mind — more convincing than the real thing.

Perhaps it had been naïve to think everything would stay free. All the same, the way the market had debased and stratified the information well filled her with distaste. Fabrication and fact, work and play, information and manipulation had become hopelessly mingled. It could be she had a role in this era after all. Perhaps an outsider could warn people of dangers they couldn't see.

In the end, Jamie Nickle was the only one from the time-travel project she was able to find outside obituaries. The project itself had disappeared into obscurity. She sent Jamie an e-mail thanking him for bringing her back to life.

Sage was still in pajamas when Patty came to find her shortly before noon. "Power up," she said brightly. "You've got to be in New York in two hours. You can take D.B.'s plane."

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"What for?"

"An interview," Patty said. "You're going to be on the net."

Cautiously, Sage said, "You're letting me talk to the media?"

"Of course," Patty said. "How else would we imprint you on the public?"

"Will you control what I say?"

"No! Just don't be boring, okay?"

Sage realized she kept asking all the wrong questions. "How much is Metameme making off this?"

"Never mind that," Patty said. "*You're* making $75,000."

A blindingly simple insight had come to Sage: Metameme sold information. As long as it was profitable, the *content* of that information was a matter of almost complete indifference.

Looking over her closet, Sage tried to think what an information warrior would wear to perform a cultural exposé. She chose a flowing Japanese silk robe, worn over a black body stocking. She left her hair untouched, falling straight to her waist. The effect pleased her; it was dramatic but elegant.

The only one who went with her was Hans the bodyguard, who acted as chauffeur and pilot. The plane, obviously outfitted for D.B., had banks upon banks of video screens, a kitchen stocked with enough caffeinated beverages to light the eastern seaboard, a flash-clean stall, and bed. When they came in sight of Manhattan, the plane disdained the airport, and instead hover-landed on a rooftop pad. A network producer met her.

"I told them I wouldn't lie," Sage said as the woman led her down a hall to the elevators. "I'm perfectly free to answer any question."

"Don't worry, you're wonderful," the producer said. "That outfit is perfect, and your hair. Everyone will love you. Just relax and be yourself."

Sage was nervous but determined as they entered the bustling studio. An audience was already sitting in bleachers around the set, but they seemed oddly quiescent. Sage did a doubletake. "Your audience," she said. "They're robots."

"Don't worry, they'll come on when we start taping," the producer assured her. "You won't be able to tell the difference. None of us can."

The show was called *Yolanda's Chat Room*, and the main set was a kitchen. Uneasily, Sage said, "What kind of questions will we cover?"

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"Just whatever comes up," the producer said. "Relax, Yolanda's a pro. Her audience profile is to die for."

A black woman who radiated near-thermonuclear energy came striding toward them across the studio. "Have I gone to heaven?" she crowed exhuberantly. "Those corporate cheapskates actually paid top dollar to get me a real guest! And they're even hyping it. Do you hear my heart beat? Ratings says there's already a spike." Her voice dropped an octave, and she was suddenly businesslike. "Hi, honey. I'm Yolanda. You won't regret this. I deliver numbers."

"Uh...good," Sage said.

"You look darling in that. Oh, I've got a feeling this is my day."

Sage waited in a room backstage till the producer came to fetch her. When her cue came, she walked out into the eye-stunning brilliance of the lights. The animatronic audience gave her a standing ovation. They were so lifelike, she actually caught herself feeling flattered.

She sat down at the kitchen table and Yolanda poured her a cup of starbucks. With exaggerated animation, Yolanda said to the audience, "Now *this* is a woman with courage like most of us can't even imagine. Isn't she?" They clapped. "Sage. You actually had to die to make your voyage, right? Weren't you afraid?"

Sage made a fatal error then. She actually considered the question. *Had* she been afraid? Thoughtfully, she said, "Actually, I think the fear was part of the appeal...."

Once caught in subjectivity, it was almost impossible to break out. They talked a while about her preparations and the trip ("Did you have any after-death experiences?"), then Yolanda asked her to describe what happened when she woke up. Sage tried to make it factual, but her bewilderment came through.

Yolanda glowed with empathy. "Weren't you angry at the way you were treated?"

By now Sage was able to think, *My feelings aren't the story here.* "I was concerned by what I saw." A lie, but she needed to steer the conversation to substantive issues.

Her host didn't follow the lead. "You've met D.B. Beddoes now, right? What do you think of this recluse billionaire who had the power to say whether you should live or not?" The audience stirred in sympathy.

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Distracted again, Sage said, "Well, you're wrong to paint him as some kind of monster. The problem's more complex than that."

"Should we be worried for you?"

"Oh, no. In fact, D.B. can be rather sweet. But that's — "

"Sweet?" Yolanda's eyes grew big.

"Well, I mean...."

Yolanda leaned across the table and touched her hand. "Honey, are you lonely here? Did you leave anyone special behind?"

Oh my God. What did I just imply?

Sage was so flustered that by the time Yolanda actually gave her an opening by saying, "What's the biggest change you've seen in the world?" she babbled something inane about self-driving cars and flash-clean booths.

When the interview wrapped up and the lights went off, Sage protested, "That was a disaster! Can't I do it over?"

"Don't worry, babe," Yolanda said. "You were natural and beautiful, that's all people see. They just want to identify with you."

She had come to deliver a clarion warning, and had been limp and vacuous instead. "What came over me? It's like I turned into one of those robots."

Yolanda's business voice said, "Those questions I asked you, they only have one answer, but that's the point. Everyone knows what you're supposed to say, then you say it, and they feel affirmed. I used to be a journalist, I know the difference."

"Used to be? Why aren't you now?" Sage asked.

"Journalists don't have control over the final product," Yolanda said. "Information production and information delivery are two completely different jobs now — and I'm telling you, honey, all the money and security is in delivery. You have to be young and committed to be a journalist, always under pressure to nose out contracts, never knowing where the next check will come from. I couldn't live like that, hand to mouth."

"But there's such a demand for information — "

"The public needs the truth but doesn't want it. The money's all in what they want but don't need." She looked away toward the now-flaccid audience and said, "Well, speak of the devil."

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D.B. was standing there, managing to make an expensive Italian coat look shapeless. In alarm, Sage blurted, "D.B.! How much did you hear?"

"Just the last part," he said. "You were fine."

"Since you're here, Mr. Beddoes," Yolanda said in a voice like lead bullets, "maybe I can ask some questions."

"No comment," he said. "Come on, Sage. Let's go to dinner."

Still in turmoil, Sage followed him out of the studio. In the elevator she said, "I wanted to tell the truth. I wanted to warn them how dangerous it is to let the market govern the information supply."

"You wouldn't have been sympathetic," he said.

"This isn't about me! If I soften a message just to be popular, I'm as evil as you."

"No, you're not," he said, trying to be comforting.

They walked across a wide lobby to the front doors of the building. Outside, it was evening, but the city lights blazed down a shining, impossible canyon. They were halfway down the broad set of steps to the sidewalk when Sage saw the paparazzi waiting for them, cameras already blinking. Suddenly, D.B.'s phone rang.

"Yeah?" he said, then stopped dead. Seizing Sage's arm, he turned around and started back up the steps.

"What is it?" she said.

"He says not to leave the building."

His pace was unhurried, but his grip on her arm was vise-tight. Back inside, a security guard came racing across the lobby toward them. "This way, Mr. Beddoes," he said, hurrying them toward the elevator while another guard locked the glass doors behind them. Outside, a siren wailed to a stop.

In the elevator, Sage said, "You can let go of my arm now."

He dropped it as if it singed. "Sorry."

Hans was scowling and talking on a headset when he met them at the top floor. He escorted them protectively to the plane. Once inside and in the air, D.B. dialed a number and said, "What the hell was that about?" He listened a while, then said, "Did they get him?" Then, "Okay. Let me talk to Patty." Moments later, he said, "Well, *that* was sure a fiasco. Did you get any pictures at all?" Pause. "Easy for you to say. You didn't have some jerk trying to get famous by waving a gun at your back. Oh yeah? Well,

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fuck *schadenfreude*. From now on be more careful who you leak my schedule to." He hung up on her and sat brooding.

Sage had picked up an important point from that exchange. "That was a photo op, wasn't it?" she said. "Patty planted those paparazzi to photograph us together. You're going ahead with her plan whether I like it or not."

He gazed at her sulkily.

"You egotistical bastard!" She felt manipulated. Her indignation nearly levitated her from her seat. Or maybe it was just the plane leveling off.

"Patty says your approval numbers are going stratospheric," he said a little resentfully.

Outside the plane window, the sky had turned black, but the ground below them was still glowing in sunlight. "My God, so is this plane," Sage said, gripping the arms of her seat. "Where are we going?"

"To dinner."

"Where?"

"Hong Kong."

A LARGE SECTION of downtown Victoria had been destroyed in an earthquake, and in its place had risen a set of three shining, silver towers that grazed the underside of hubris. As the plane circled, the afternoon sun turned them incendiary.

"The south one's mine," D.B. said absently. "But we're not going there."

It dawned on Sage that people weren't kidding when they said he was rich.

They climbed from the plane onto a windy platform that jutted from the north tower like a fungus from a tree trunk. Sage found the height exhilarating; across the strait the skyscrapers of Kowloon looked like miniatures, and the mountain-framed harbor was freckled with tiny boats. But Hans was getting nervous at her standing near the edge, so she followed D.B. inside.

The maître d' ushered them to a window table. D.B. was still edgy and morose until they had polished off a bottle of pinot noir; then he asked about her day.

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"Did you know that Leon Trotsky has been expunged from the collective memory?" she said.

"Hmm. My day wasn't so hot, either."

"Don't you care?"

He shrugged. "He was part of a memeplex the culture got inoculated against last century. You know why?"

"Why?" Sage said fatalistically.

"Because it lacked entertainment value," D.B. said. "The least people want from their government is entertainment. Once everyone realized the class war was over and it was just going to be five-year plans from here on in, they knew what a yawner they'd created, and flushed it for something with more pizzazz."

She fitted that answer into her picture of him. "So don't you ever have labor trouble?"

"Labor?" he stared at her. "Information isn't made in factories."

"It still takes work to produce."

"Oh, well, I don't employ the producers, I told you that. Journalists, researchers — they make bad employees. Anyone with a commitment to a set of professional standards can't be completely loyal to the company. So I just buy their product, and leave the standards up to them."

"Along with the financial risk," she said. "This whole economy of yours rests on the backs of exploited information workers who have no control over the fruits of their labor."

"What is this, a barbecue?" he said, irritated.

"You're a regressive thinker, D.B."

"You're the one from the past."

"Besides being a manipulative s.o.b."

"Hot damn, what a romantic dinner this is."

But by the time the food came, Sage was feeling pleasantly buzzed; the bordeaux with dinner and cognac afterward made her temporarily forgive the day for its disappointments. There would be other days, other chances to denounce him.

The sun was low and coppery behind the headland when they finished, and the city lights were beginning to twinkle. "We can't go back yet," Sage said. "I've got to touch ground, or I won't feel like I've been here." So they took a glass elevator to the plaza between the towers and

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strolled through a cloud of pigeons to an abstract sculpture in the center of the square. Sage leaned back against the warm enamel surface and watched the Asian sky turn electric pink and orange, her thoughts pinwheeling pleasantly in her head. The air was balmy and sensual, smelling of the sea. And, yes, there was a pleasant exhilaration at being with a man who could buy the inner solar system and still leave a tip.

Suddenly, he leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. She looked at him in surprise. Was he blushing, or was it the sunset?

"Was that for the reporters?" she asked.

"No," he said awkwardly. "That was for me. Sorry."

It was endearingly inept. "That was no kiss," she informed him. "*This* is a kiss." She took his head in her hands and gave him a long, lingering kiss. A thorough kiss, one that would take.

When she pulled away, his glasses were fogged up. He fumbled to wipe them. Laughing, she said, "Race you to the elevator," and took off.

She lost a shoe halfway across the plaza, but beat him anyway. Laughing breathlessly, she started back to get it, but he caught her hand and said, "Leave it. Maybe some prince will find it and come after you."

"What would I do with a prince?" she said.

"I don't know. Kiss him. Confuse him."

She realized he wasn't joking.

They returned silently to the plane. The last shreds of brilliance were fading from the sky when they took off. D.B. watched it out the window, unaware she was looking at him, at the expression of longing on his face. It seemed implausible that a man like him could long for anything.

"Sage, I've got an idea," he said, turning to her. "Let's fly on to Paris and see the sunset again."

She smiled. "We can't just go chasing sunsets around the globe."

"Why not?"

"Because...we're adults. We've got responsibilities. Especially you."

He turned back restlessly to the window. Fidgeting with the arm of his chair, he said, "That was one hell of a meme you gave me."

"People have been passing that one around for a long time."

"I guess so." He paused. "That was all just playacting, right?"

She found it hard to answer. Because, unexpectedly, she wasn't sure. At last she said, "Sure. If that's what it was for you, that's what it was for me."

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The liquor that had made her so giddy was now putting her to sleep. She reclined her seat as far as it would go and started dozing off to the drone of the engines. Later, she roused momentarily to find him still awake, still watching her with an expression too complex to decode.

SAGE WOKE in her own bed the next morning, late and hung over, to find her face had launched a thousand tabloids.

THE KISS was emblazoned across one Web page, along with a telephoto shot of her and D.B. on the plaza in Hong Kong. Another page was auctioning her lost shoe for several thousand dollars. "Shit," she said, and called Patty.

"Who approved those photos?" she demanded, her temples throbbing.

"I did," Patty said, cheerful enough to deserve summary execution. There was a new collection of objects in her hair. An Oriental drink parasol and a tiny Venus de Milo. "Don't worry, I'm taking care of everything."

"I didn't want that spread all over the net," Sage said. "It was private."

"If you wanted privacy, Sage, you sure picked the wrong planet. Not to mention the wrong guy."

After Sage hung up, she sat thinking: as long as she was part of the Metameme pseudo-reality, she was never going to be herself. Even sincere acts and unpremeditated words would be manipulated into lies.

She needed to get away. But to where? She had no friends, no family to run to. No money, no skills. Nothing marketable but notoriety.

Nevertheless, she needed to escape. As far as she knew, there was only one way out of D.B.'s house, the guarded underground tunnel. After dressing and eating aspirin for lunch, Sage went out to the pine-tree room. No one was around to observe her, so she took the elevator down to the bottom level.

To her surprise, the limo was waiting at the curb. Glancing around, she got in. As soon as the door closed, the vehicle started rolling silently forward. She waited, hoping the guards would think it was D.B. and let her through.

Abreast of the checkpoint, the car came to a stop. One of the phone

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screens buzzed. Sage hesitated, but at last touched the "answer" icon. It was D.B. He was in his office, wearing a rumpled sweatshirt.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"Out," she said, keeping her face impenetrable.

He absorbed her expression, and his face turned as uncommunicative as hers. "Would you mind taking another car? That one's a little conspicuous."

"I'll take the lawnmower if I have to," Sage said.

"Okay, get out and I'll send something else."

She got out and the limo rolled away backward, disappearing around a curve in the tunnel. The guard in the glass booth opposite her was trying not to watch. Soon another vehicle came self-propelled up the tunnel — a sleek, silver sports convertible. Sage didn't recognize the make, but the design was a universal language: the car burned pure sex appeal. She wondered what D.B. thought of her, to have chosen that car.

There was a steering wheel, accelerator, and brake, but all the other controls had been replaced by a screen. When she got into the driver's seat, the phone rang. Sighing, she answered.

"Do you know how to program it?" D.B. asked.

"Can't I just drive it?"

"No. It's illegal on the freeways. Traffic control laws. Just tell me where you want to go and I'll program it from here."

"I suppose you can trace where I go anyway."

In a martyred tone he said, "Sage, I apologize for my world. Cars don't come without tracer functions now."

There was no help for it, so she told him to send her to the university. The screen flashed to a different mode as he programmed it. "When you want to come back, just hit 'Return,'" he said. She refrained from commenting on whether she was going to come back.

It was a crisp and sunny day, and as the car cruised down the winding mountain road, Sage lowered the top to enjoy the wind in her hair and (with only a twinge of self-consciousness) the chic and muscular machine cornering lithely beneath her. She found a pair of sunglasses in the glove box and put them on so she would match the car.

At the freeway the car shot up the ramp toward a solid wall of traffic, and she found the brake didn't work. Just when a collision seemed

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imminent, a sports-car-sized notch opened up, and her vehicle merged. Traveling at full speed only six inches from the car ahead gave her panic reflexes a workout, but the traffic flowed smoothly at a volume that would have caused apocalyptic jams in her time.

On the road into downtown, her own face loomed from a video billboard. For a distraction she tried the radio, but the first thing to issue from it was a come-on for a program called "Sage: Enchantress from the Other Side of Time." She turned it off, gagging.

Just then she noticed the patrol car behind her. The phone rang.

"We are taking control of your vehicle," the officer said when she answered. "Turn on your fax machine and we will send the warrant."

"What have I done?" Sage asked as her vehicle veered onto an off-ramp.

"You have been subpoenaed to appear at the Federal Courthouse."

"What for?"

"You'll have to ask them that, ma'am."

The car auto-negotiated a tangle of ramps that disgorged into downtown traffic. With the police close behind, she pulled up to the curb before a tall steel-and-glass building set back from the street behind a concrete plaza. A small crowd was waiting there, including two camera teams. As Sage got out, a woman reporter dashed over and put a microphone to her face. "Sage, do you have some ancient tribal medicine that explains your sexual magnetism?"

A tall, balding man in a brown suit met her at the curb. "Ms. Akwesasne, I represent a consortium of firms led by the Infometics Corporation that has brought suit to force a fairer distribution of information concerning you. We need your testimony to prove that there has been an illegal restraint of trade — "

A shiny black car pulled up at the curb, and Mr. Jabhwalla jumped out, looking perfectly composed and elegant. "I would advise you not to say anything," he told Sage.

"Oh, so now you're threatening the witness?" the other lawyer said. "I believe we got that on tape." Two video cameras swung to Mr. Jabhwalla's face for a reaction.

"She's not your witness," he said imperturbably. "Your subpoena has no force over her. This isn't Sage Akwesasne. She is a replica." In an

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undertone to Sage he said, "I can take care of this, if you want to go on about your business. You just need to sign here — "

An interruption saved her from having to tell him where to put his contract. The cameras turned to follow the approach of another figure across the plaza from the courthouse door. He was a burly, bearded man in a camouflage jacket and combat boots, waving a legal paper over his head. "Court order!" he was shouting. "Court order!" The two lawyers exchanged a look of mutual commiseration.

"Make way for the rights of the consumers, you corporate weevils!" the newcomer bellowed as he came up. "I'm Harry Dolnick, the consumer's candidate for city council, and I've got here a court order for Sage Akwesasne to publicly reveal the message she brought back from the Holians."

"I beg your pardon?" Sage said, perplexed.

He turned around to speak to one of the cameras. "Who are the Holians, you ask? We don't know what they call themselves. The fact that aliens live around the black hole has been known to the global elite for years, but you and I could only learn of their existence from the underground lists, where the information can spread unfalsified by corporate media. The Holians would never have let a human being pass through their space without sending a message back, encoded in her DNA. It only stands to reason."

"*What?*" Sage said.

"The question is, what's in the message that is so valuable that the globals are standing here fighting over legal control of her? There could only be one answer. It's a contract offer to market Brand Earth on an interstellar scale."

"You see the kind of irritation we can protect you from," Mr. Jabhwalla whispered in her ear.

Something D.B. had once said about the Promethean quality of her story came back to Sage. Only now the myth seemed to have mutated into a hybrid of capitalism and conspiracy theory. "Listen," she said. The cameras swiveled round to her face. "I can comply with your court order right now. There are no Holians, and there's no contract offer in my DNA."

"Do you think she would admit it?" Harry Dolnick thundered. "Here in this pool of piranhas? No," he addressed the crowd, "this is why the

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consumers need to rise up and demand their rights! We should all be shareholders in Brand Earth!" The office workers on lunch break continued munching their sandwiches and waving at the cameras. One of them offered Harry Dolnick an autograph book and he paused to sign it.

The woman reporter had pushed to Sage's elbow, and now said, "Sage, my viewers are demanding to know something. What brand of lipstick are you wearing?"

"Dear God, get me out of here," Sage muttered.

Mr. Jabhwalla's phone rang. He answered it, then silently handed it to Sage.

"This makes terrific theater," D.B. said. "You ought to see how many sites we're streaming this to."

"Do you have me under surveillance?" Sage glanced up, half expecting to spot a Metameme spy satellite overhead.

"I'm watching on television, like the rest of the western hemisphere," he said. She looked at one of the cameras, held by a beefy man in sandals. "Yeah, that one," he said.

"They're yours?"

"No, they're freelancers. We're just buying their feed."

"Did you set this up?" she demanded. The lawyers, who had been arguing, paused to look at her. She turned her back and lowered her voice. "Did you start these rumors about aliens and genetic messages?"

"No, those are wild memes that mutated spontaneously into existence. You're like hermeneutical flypaper, Sage. Theories just stick to you."

"You need to squelch them!" she said.

"What for?" He sounded puzzled.

"Because they're wacko claptrap!"

"So? That doesn't mean they can't be profitable."

Of course, what had she been thinking? Truth was not the standard of information, only profit.

"You look a little irritated," D.B. said. She was searching for a sufficiently blistering word when he said, "Tell you what. Turn around and look across the street."

She did. There was nothing there but a large building of gray granite. "See the ground floor door?" he said. "Go in there."

"But...it's the public library," she said.

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"I know. I own it."

Now that he mentioned it, she saw the stylized MM logo on the signage. "How did you — "

"Never mind, just do it. Someone will meet you."

She started pushing her way through the crowd. Mr. Jabhwalla said, "Wait! You can't leave without — "

"You said yourself, I'm not Sage Akwesasne," she told him. "Now back off before I sue you for unlawful restraint."

"You're catching on," D.B. said. Sage hung up the phone and tossed it back to the lawyer.

All the way across the street she was mobbed by teenage girls offering notebooks and body parts for her to autograph. When she reached the staff entrance, a librarian waiting inside pushed it open for her, and she slipped through, relieved by the quiet inside. "Follow me," the woman said.

They went up a back stairway to a hallway lined with offices. The librarian stopped before what looked like a closet door and said, "Wait here while I get the key." Sage stood staring at a motivational poster on the corridor wall that showed a soaring eagle with the caption,

Free Speech

which someone had defaced, "Only $91.95/month."

The librarian came back and opened the door onto a spiral, cast-iron staircase. Puzzled, Sage followed her onto the gravel roof. The wind was blowing, bringing the sound of Harry Dolnick's voice up from the street below. A low-flying aircraft passed overhead, then circled; then, with a blast of dust and gravel, it landed vertically on the other end of the roof, and she recognized its outline. As the door opened and the steps extended, Sage dashed over to it, wondering when it had started to seem normal to be plucked off a rooftop by a private jet.

Inside, D.B. was talking to half a dozen people at once on his video screens. Feeling defeated, Sage slouched into a leather seat as the plane took off. Her attempt to escape the constructed reality of Metameme had only landed her in other realities where her identity was no more her own than here. It was like being a quark, constructed entirely of spin.

The problem was larger than she had supposed. Wired together in a free-market free-for-all, the collective brains of the human race had actually invented a world where it was impossible to tell the truth.

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The landscape had dwindled into a wrinkled counterpane below by the time D.B. cut off his connections and came to sit opposite her. With some surprise, she saw he was dressed in a tuxedo. It had a remarkable effect. He had an embryonic air of distinction.

"Where are we going now?" Sage asked.

"Washington D.C. You wanted to meet the president. Well, our guy won the election, so we're going to the victory party."

"Your guy?" Sage looked at him balefully. "I'm going to hate his politics, aren't I?"

"I don't know." D.B. shrugged, fiddling self-consciously with his cuffs. "Look, he's only our guy because we engineered his image. You'll have to ask him about politics. As far as I know, he's like all the others, pro-prosperity."

"That's safe."

"Uh, Sage, this is going to be kind of formal. You might want to order something to wear."

With a feeling of impending doom, she sat down at one of his terminals to try and find out what might conceivably be fashionable. The range of choices was bewildering. Briefly, she thought of asking Patty's advice, then remembered the tiger skin. Finally, unable to decipher any pattern, she opted for simplicity: a low-cut, shimmering crimson sheath held up with spaghetti straps. The computer suggested a matching shawl, shoes, and purse, so she went for the whole package, muttering when it didn't tell her the price.

"Trust me, you can afford it," D.B. said.

When the plane came down on a rooftop just at the edge of restricted air space, a delivery company was waiting with a pile of packages. Sage gathered them in, then shooed D.B. out of the plane. Alone, she stripped and stepped into the flash clean booth. When she slipped on the dress, it felt like water against her skin, sleek and caressing. The earrings dangled like stone kisses against her neck, just heavy enough to let her know they were there. She gathered up the shawl, shook back her hair, and stepped to the door.

The look of sheer exhilaration on D.B.'s face told her she had scored a bullseye. He offered his arm, and she took it, giving it a little squeeze for the moral support.

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A limo was waiting for them on the floor below. As it whisked them through the streets, D.B. peered out the windows with growing unease. At last Sage said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just hate these party things," he said.

By the time the limo pulled into a blocked-off street behind the Capitol building, he was gripping his knees in an obvious paroxysm of nerves. Sage leaned forward and put a hand on his. "Look at it this way," she said. "You're not yourself, you're an actor playing the richest man in the world. The others — well, the script calls for them to envy you."

He looked at her, a long look, then said, "Yeah. They will."

There was a crowd of spectators and reporters lining the monumental stone steps of the building across the street. As soon as Sage and D.B. stepped out of the car, there was a trampling rush toward them, and their driver and bodyguard had to clear a path. A broad red cascade of carpet led up the stairway, with the crowds held back by ropes and stanchions on either side. As soon as they started up, Sage could feel the pressure of a hundred lenses on her. It was so distracting they were halfway up before she realized what the building was.

"The Library of Congress?" she whispered at D.B. "Do you own this one, too?"

"Don't start, Sage," D.B. said through his teeth. "I just help them out. They're like the rest of the government, so underfunded they couldn't pay the electric bill unless I bought information from them."

They passed through towering arches into the Great Hall, a two-story Beaux Arts fantasia of gaudy marbles, bronze nymphs, gilt, and bared-tooth glamor. The party spilled down mosaic-floored halls on either side and up the stairs to the pillared balconies above. With a sinking heart, Sage saw she had guessed radically wrong on fashion — the style called for ruffles and flounces. Most women entering were peeling off from their escorts to visit the ladies' lounge, so Sage parted from D.B. and followed the stream.

When she entered the restroom, a group of women were having an animated conversation that broke off abruptly when they saw her. They all took out their phones; with a snick like so many switchblades, the retractable screens unfolded and the women began perusing the photos of themselves that had been taken as they came up the steps. Silence fell, except for the curses and cries of disappointment as the photos inevitably

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failed to live up to expectation. Sage went into one of the marble stalls to hide. A video screen inside the stall door helpfully offered to order her a different dress.

D.B. was surrounded by businessmen in evening dress when she joined him again. They broke off shop talk and eagerly introduced themselves to her, and she had to parry several jocular remarks about the past. The men's female companions looked on with frozen smiles. As D.B. was drawing her away to get some wine, an artfully sculpted woman leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Nice accessorizing, dear. And in such a short time. Clever you."

"These people are hateful," Sage whispered to D.B. as they moved away. Rebelliously, she took his arm to prove he was more than just an accessory.

"Here, get drunk," he suggested, plucking a flute of champagne from a passing tray.

Another businessman approached him with a hearty, "D.B., you're like a new man! I saw the turnaround in your popularity numbers. Enough to give a person whiplash. Listen, I've got something you might be interested in...."

D.B. looked like he was thinking of driving a nail into his skull to distract himself.

When at last the businessman moved on, Sage said, "Do you have a phone with you?"

"Of course," he said. "Why?"

"I'd like to approve my own pictures."

"Don't worry, Patty's handling it."

"No. I'd like to approve my *own* pictures."

He hesitated, then took a phone from his pocket and gave it to her. "Don't do it here," he said. "Take it somewhere private." She slipped it in her purse.

Just then the string quartet that had been playing Vivaldi broke into a country western tune. All eyes turned to the balcony above, where the victorious candidate appeared. He was a weatherbeaten man wearing a tuxedo with cowboy hat and boots. He waved to the universal applause, then started making his way around the balcony and down the white marble stairs, shaking hands and greeting supporters along the way.

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"Patty and I figured he wasn't running against the other candidates," D.B. explained in an undertone. "He was running against the late-night comedians. So we hired a team of crack joke writers and made him the funniest guy on the net. The electorate laughed all the way to the polls. Voter participation went up to thirty percent."

"What a boon to democracy," Sage said.

"It just proves you can't act like customers owe you their attention. You've got to earn it."

The president-elect had come opposite them. On seeing D.B. he did a comic doubletake, then said, "D.B. Beddoes, in public! Say, how does it feel to be popular all of a sudden? No, wait—I know!" As everyone around him laughed, he took D.B.'s hand and leaned close to say, "Thanks for the media blitz the last few days. You crowded my opponent's little bombshell right off the air. Good work."

Sage turned to D.B., speechless — for one point five seconds. Then, "You jerk!" she said.

D.B. gripped her arm tightly. "Sage, let me introduce — "

"No," she said, pulling her arm away. "Is that what this has all been about? You've been using me as a smokescreen to manipulate an election?"

"No," he said, flushing crimson.

"Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Beddoes. I still happen to believe in democracy, and I will not be used as your corporate tool to corrupt the process."

By now, he had gotten angry. "I have done more to promote democracy than Thomas fucking Jefferson."

"By burying people in infocrap till they're incapable of judgment or reason? Before you trot out your cynical market populism, let me say something. Democracy's not just about customer satisfaction. It's not about finding the lowest common denominator. It's about finding the highest."

The whole room had fallen breathlessly silent. D.B. said, "Can we talk about this some other time?"

"No," Sage said, "because there's not going to *be* another time. I've had it with you. I'm asserting my copyright. I'm going out there to expose you."

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"Fine!" he said. "Go for it! Then maybe I'll just run off another copy of you that suits me better."

It felt like a gut-punch to her humanity. There was even an intake of breath in the listening crowd. "Go back to hell," Sage said, and walked away in the first direction that offered an empty space, which happened to be up the stairs. Silent people in gowns and tails moved out of her way as she climbed the marble steps in the most conspicuous exit she could have chosen.

Once on the second floor, Sage headed down a random hallway till she was out of the crowd, and heard the hum of conversation resume behind her. Her heart was beating very fast. She passed down a long gallery into an empty, octagonal exhibit hall. On the western wall was a line of three tall glass doors letting onto a pillared balcony. She lifted the heavy old latch and went outside.

At first she paced up and down behind towering columns, replaying the argument in her mind till her temper cooled. She looked out over the low stone balustrade. The setting sun was shining through the windows in the Capitol dome, making it look transparent and fragile, like everything it represented. She suddenly felt trapped and friendless. He had said it all: she was just product, only of value if the demand exceeded the supply.

Below on the street, partygoers were still arriving, the cameras still shooting. Doubtless, the scene that had just taken place was already on the net. To distract herself, she took D.B.'s phone from her purse, opened the screen, and spoke her own name into the search box. It responded with a cascade of hits, but one caught her eye — a private folder named "Sage." Curious, she opened it and found an assortment of documents, D.B.'s private collection. One of them was an e-mail to her from Jamie Nickle, sent two days ago and never received.

No longer feeling like she was snooping, she opened it.

Sage, (it said)

There is something I have to let you know about. I didn't have time today, and God knows when we might see each other again. This is it: Years ago, shortly after we sent you off to the future, another team of physicists proved that the universe is temporally

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symmetrical. That is, for every quantum particle that travels forward in time, there is another identical one that goes backward, and those backward particles (which they called "quirks," ha ha) are detectable. You can check with me for details. This is the point: we instantly realized it would be possible to aim a quirkstream at the same black hole that sent you here, and by playing the process in reverse, send a message backward to any date when a quirk detector existed.

Of course, the first thing we did was build a quirk detector. Since we had just sent someone forward, we thought the future might respond by sending someone back, so we made sure we could reassemble anyone who came through. It took us five years; and since you have now been here five years, the time has just now come when we can send a person back and know they will be received.

So if for any reason you don't like it here and want to go back, the technology exists. Just give me a call.

Jamie

The relief Sage felt was dizzying. She was *not* trapped or friendless. She had a way out of this time, and back to her own. Laughing aloud, she kissed the screen that had brought her the news, then folded it up and put it back in her purse. The sun had come out from behind the dome, and was bathing her in a glorious shower of photons. Behind her, the door clicked, and she glanced around. It was D.B. He had ripped off his bowtie and disposed of the body, and his hair looked like he had been tearing at it.

He just stood watching her at first, and she watched the sun, her back to him. At last, when the silence had grown over-long, he said, "Listen. That was just about the stupidest thing I ever said."

She said nothing, waiting to see where this would go.

"I wouldn't do it," he said. "I'd be crazy to copy you. Your whole value is in your uniqueness, the fact there's no one else like you."

That finally made her turn around. He was looking at her with the same expression he had looked at the sunset the night before, the one he had wanted to chase even knowing he could never possess it. "Look, I'll destroy the disk," he said. When she still didn't answer, he said, "All right, I'll give it to you, and *you* can destroy it. Or whatever."

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Now that he had no ultimate power over her, much of the ice had melted from her anger. "All right," she said. "It's a deal. No backups."

"No backups." There was an awkward pause. He came forward to the balustrade and looked out, avoiding her gaze. "I couldn't say it back there, but the idea that I would use you to affect something as paltry as an election — well, it's ludicrous. You don't get what you are, Sage. I didn't want to use you to change the government for the next four years. I wanted to change the world for centuries to come."

He gestured dismissively at the hub of earthly power. "This world doesn't live up to my expectations. It needs a heart transplant, a phase change. That's what I want. And you are the highest-caliber archetype I'm ever likely to lay my hands on. It took me five years to set it up. I was going to knock the culture off its orbit with you. You were going to be the first woman of your kind, homo novus."

"I'm more than just a meme, D.B.," she said.

"Believe it or not, I have figured that out." He glanced at her sideways.

"No one ever accused you of being dumb," she said.

He chewed his lip, his hands in his pockets. "I was thinking just now, when I was angry at you — probably seventy percent of the women in that room would sleep with me."

From Sage's observations, the estimate was low. But she shook her head. "Not with you, D.B. With your brand name."

"Whereas the one woman I'd like to — no, damn it, that's the wrong thing to say."

She drew breath to save him, but he said, "No, shut up. I've got to figure out how to say this without making it sound like it's all about lust, because it's not. Only partly. Damn." He pounded his fist against the granite pillar, then shook it in pain. "Ouch. The thing is, there's another reason I couldn't copy you. Because I don't *want* a copy. I want the original. The only drawback is, you don't give a shit whether I live or die."

"That's not true."

He looked at her, hugging his bruised hand under the other arm. "Does that mean the 'die' vote won?"

"Do you know what I just found out?" She leaned against the pillar, feeling the warm stone on her bare back. "There is a way to travel backward in time. It's possible for me to return to my own era."

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His face froze in a look of tachycardiac horror. "No!" He spun around and paced away, fists clenched in rage and frustration. "God fucking damn!" He turned back on her. "How did you find out?" Then, before she could answer, realization crossed his face. "My phone! Oh, how could I have such crap for brains?"

Watching calmly, she said, "You knew. You were hiding it from me."

"I had to, Sage! I need you here. I didn't want you to get away. I banked everything on you."

"I'm not your intellectual property, D.B. I deserve to decide for myself."

She watched the thought come upon him that he had actually lost, that he no longer controlled any of the variables. He looked stunned at such an alien state of affairs.

"I don't know what to say," he said numbly.

"What about *asking* me to stay?"

He studied her face, and she could actually see new thoughts dawning on him. "You wouldn't, would you?" he said. When she didn't answer, he came forward, putting his hands on her arms. "Sage — "

The opportunity was too good to pass up. She pulled him close by the lapels and kissed him. It took him by surprise again, but not so badly as the night before, and it was a far more satisfying experience.

"Oh, God, Sage," he breathed when it was over. "Let's go — "

She put a finger on his lips. "Shut up," she said tenderly. "That wasn't my answer."

"It wasn't?"

"This is my problem, D.B. You're a dangerous megalomaniac. You manipulate people as naturally as you breathe. I find your life work reprehensible; I loathe your politics. You're also cute and smart and funny, and there are times when I really want to take off in your plane, if you know what I mean."

He started to say something, but she stopped him again. "If I stay here, there's not a chance I'll be able to keep away from you, and I don't know if my nerves can handle it. So I've decided to go back. I just haven't figured out when."

He took it calmly. "I guess that's the best I could hope for."

Too calmly. It made her suspicious. "Did you know I was going to say that?"

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"Well," he admitted, "the thing is, you *did* go back. It's part of the historical record."

She pushed him away. "What historical record? I looked for information on our project. There wasn't any."

"There's some information not even I will sell."

"You bastard! So if you knew I was going to go back, what was this all about?"

"The historical record doesn't say how long you spent here. You would never say a word about the future, or anything you did here. You said it was for fear of making it happen."

She looked out at the Capitol dome against the scarlet sky, on the street below where the photographers were hauling out infrared cameras to get a better shot of the drama on the balcony. "So I wasn't able to prevent any of this," she said. "That means it's inevitable."

"Absolutely inevitable," he said.

"Well then," she said, "I guess I better get used to it."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

IN AUGUST OF 2001 we will take you back to the early 1970s, to a time when a writer of exceptional talent had a moment of startling clarity. Paul J. McAuley brings us there in a tale of alternate history; "The Two Dicks," as you will see next month, is nothing short of ingenious.

Also slated for August is a horror story set in the northern reaches of the United Kingdom. To say too much about "On Skua Island" would be a mistake, but rest assured that John Langan's first appearance in our pages will be haunting.

In September, we'll bring you our second special issue of the year. This one is devoted to Kate Wilhelm, featuring a wonderful new novella from a master of the form.

Our October issue also promises to be a good one. We expect to have a lovely new fantasy novelet by Poul Anderson along with a science fiction adventure by Ian Watson and perhaps a Mathesonian fantasy (or is it Beaumontian?) by Jack O'Connell as well. Be sure to subscribe so you won't miss any of these goodies.

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CURIOSITIES

COSMIC BANDITOS, BY A. C. WEISBECKER (1986)

COSMIC Banditos appeared in a decade when drugs, sex, science, and crime were frowned upon. Yet this cheerfully immoral novel romped with them all. Then it vanished — apparently, like the quark, having only a *tendency* to exist.

Our narrator is a once-normal American guy who now hangs out in the Caribbean with grenade-happy spooks, B-29-flying freaks, lovable Banditos, and misunderstood Dope Lords. Together, they're engaged in marijuana smuggling, automatic-weapons blasting, drug consumption (our narrator succumbs to "intense social pressure"), and you name it.

During a dip in their fortunes, our narrator's Bandito friend Jose mugs a vacationing physicist and his family, and physics books in the loot cause the trouble that ensues.

Studying the books, our narrator realizes there must be an Underlying (Subatomic) Reality to the possibly illusory world of Banditos and Dope Lords — so he and Jose set off to confront the physicist and figure out what's really going on. (They may also tell him that they have reason to believe his daughter Tina is a person of loose morals.)

Along the way, we're introduced to the Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics (including Alternative Banditos), to the Double Slit Experiment (a Bandito assault), and to Schrödinger's Bandito. In short, our narrator explains each scientific concept in layman's terms...if the layman happens to be a Bandito.

"Not much is known about A.C. Weisbecker," the endnote says, "and A.C. Weisbecker wants to keep it that way." This year's publication of Weisbecker's memoir *In Search of Captain Zero* will no doubt thwart that desire — but it may or may not prompt a new edition of *Cosmic Banditos* to pop into existence as well.

Schrödinger's Bandito will decide.

— Bradley Denton

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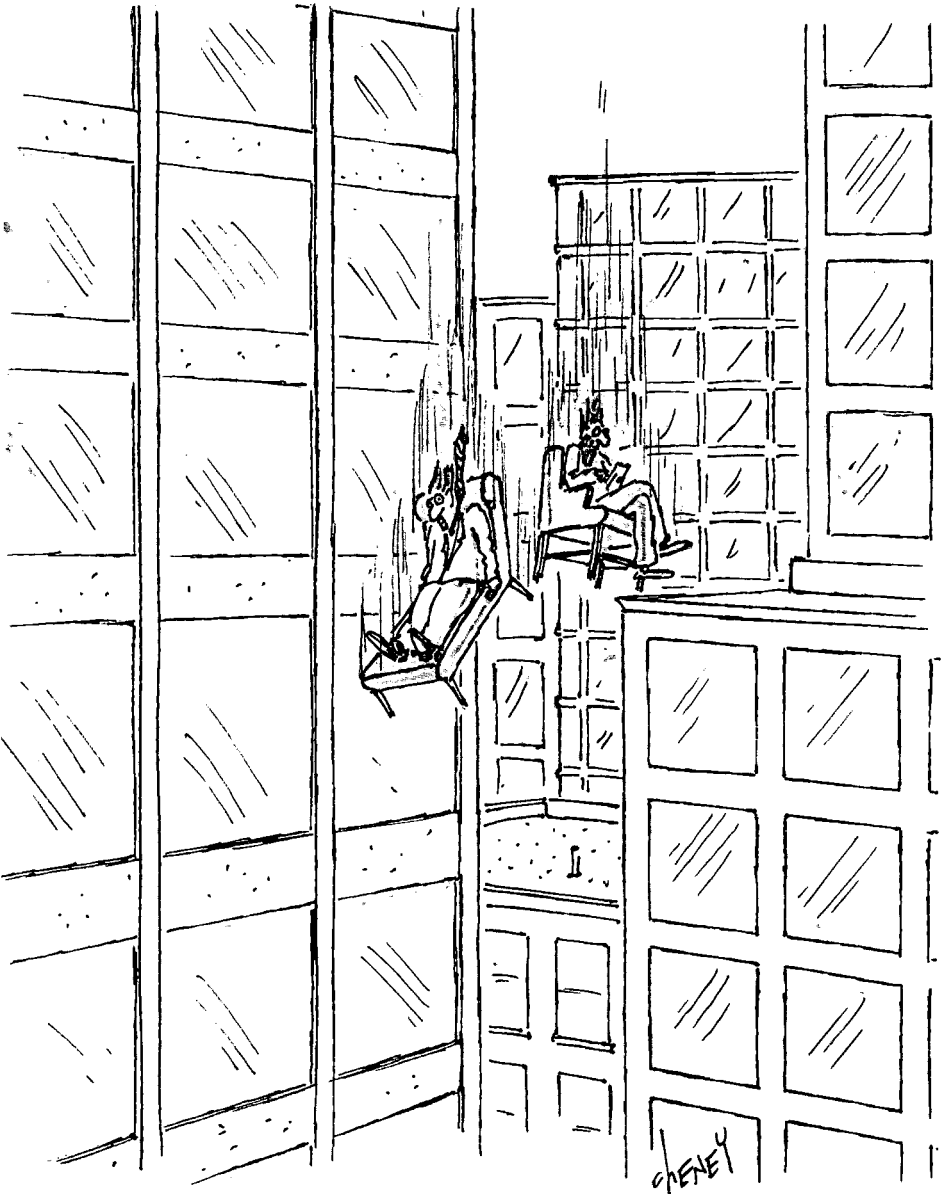

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